

Salvation to Maturity: a simple guide.

Christianity is both simple and complex. I like to use the game of golf as an analogy. Anyone with clubs and shoes and walk out on a golf course and call themselves a golfer. That relates to the simplicity of salvation but as anyone knows who has tried golf; it takes a lifetime of *practice* to excel and even the best players make mistakes.

Why does a person need to mature if they're already 'saved'?

In a nut shell: to gain strength so you can overcome Satan and avoid daily pitfalls. James said, "*Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.*" I've often heard people quote the second part without the first but if you try to resist Satan without God's strength inside you, he won't budge. On top of that, Satan will use any trick in the book to try to steal your faith and salvation, especially for new Christians. The best illustration I know for that is the *Parable of the Sower*. (Luke 8: 4-15)

Parable of the Sower (Note: the "seed" is the Word of God.) Luke 8	
Seed 1 -	fell along the path, got trampled, and birds ate it. (v.5)
Equivalent -	Some "hear" the Word but the devil takes it from their <i>hearts</i> . Thus, <i>they never believe</i> and are never saved . (v.12)
Seed 2 -	fell on rock, sprang up, but withered because they had no moisture. (v.6)
Equivalent -	Some " <i>receive</i> " the Word with joy but they have no "root" . " <i>They believe for a while</i> , but in time of <i>testing</i> , they fall away ." (v.13)
Seed 3 -	fell among thorns that grew up with it and choked the plants. (v.7)
Equivalent -	Some "hear" but as they go on their way, they are choked by life's worries, riches, and pleasures, and <i>they don't mature</i> . (v.14)
Seed 4 -	fell on good soil and yielded a crop, a hundred times what was sown. (v.8)
Equivalent -	Some hear the Word and <i>retain it</i> because they have a <i>good and noble heart</i> . By <i>persevering</i> , they produce a crop . (v.15)

Obviously, just "*hearing*" the Word or even "*receiving it*" will not guarantee that you get to heaven. You must develop a "*root*" so you don't "*fall away*". (seed 2)

"Faith": the "root" of salvation.

The Bible likes to use 'plants' as analogies and so do I. The 'root' is the most important part of a plant and it's the part that no one can see, except God. That's why no one can judge a person by outward appearance. A plant can look tired and withered, even dead, but if it has a good 'root', that plant can rebound and be stronger than before.

So how do I get 'faith' and how do I know when I have it?

Faith is being 'certain' of what you cannot see. (Heb.11:1) In other words, it's just believing that God exists (from the Bible) and He's the One, True, Living God.

Obviously, not everyone has the same amount of 'faith' because some people are more 'certain' than others. Faith is increased by knowledge and understanding of the Word as a person matures. Yet, it only takes a little to be 'saved'. So how can you tell if you have enough? Let me ask you something: When you get on your knees to pray, do you think you're talking to an all-powerful, all-knowing God? You *must* or you would be talking to yourself, so every time you pray, you are proving your faith. If you ever doubt your *own* faith, which happens to many people, just go to a private spot and *pray*, reminding yourself that you wouldn't be doing that if you didn't believe. It sounds too simple to be true but try it and see.

Step 1: Salvation

Faith in God, alone, will not get a person to heaven. The Muslims and Jews believe in the same God of Abraham but salvation can only come through Jesus because it was only through His sacrifice that our sins can be forgiven. And *that's* how you get to heaven.

Paul said, "If you **confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart** that **God raised him from the dead**, you will be **saved**. (Rom. 10:9)

In other words, *speak **out loud** and tell God* that you believe in Jesus, as the Son of God, and that He died for your sins and you want your sins forgiven in His Name. It's that simple ... but you have to **ask**.

You may not feel different, right away, but follow the rest of these steps and you will. Remember: 'Believing in your heart' is that element of 'faith' that Satan wants to steal away before you ever get started (seed 1). After you get past the prayer, you are officially 'saved' but you must develop a 'root' or you could 'fall away' in 'times of testing' (seed 2). After all, being 'saved' does not mean all your struggles are going to disappear. In fact, everyone who is accepted by God undergoes some type of 'testing' or 'discipline', *eventually*, because that's how God '*trains us*', as a Father should. (Heb. 12:5-11)

Yet, God will not let a person be tempted more than than he can bear and He will also provide a way out so you can stand up under it. (1Cor. 10:13) I heard a person refer to that verse once and say, "God must think I'm pretty strong." lol. Yes ... He sure does. God knows *exactly* what He's doing. After all, '*holding on to your faith*' in times of trouble is what makes that 'root' stronger. All those who *persevere* will be rewarded.

Okay, I'm 'saved'; now what?

As I said, you have to build your "root". On a side note, I wrote most of this in 2010, as the last chapter to my book, because I needed 35,000 words. However, my aunt, whom I respect greatly, said it was her favorite chapter. [sigh] That *wasn't* what I wanted to hear but she had a point: salvation is the most important topic.

For the record, this is not meant to be steps taken in order to maturity . It's meant to be a list that you can practice in *any order* or all at once, to get on the '*road to maturity*' and pass those trials along the way. These are based on my own experiences so others may have a different list. Yet, for a maturity *scale*, see 2 Pet. 1:5-9. (illus. @ bottom.)

Step 2: Tell someone.

Granted, you can be saved by yourself but don't try to keep it a secret because that makes it easier for Satan to steal your initial faith. In other words, "*You wouldn't light a lamp and put it under a bowl. You would **put it on a stand** so it gives light to everyone in the house.*" (Matthew 5:15)

Jesus said, "*Whoever **acknowledges me before men**, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.*" (Matt. 10: 32-33)

Note: If your family and friends are *not* Christians, I would suggest going to church and telling someone there because everyone needs a little support in the beginning. Don't be surprised if they want to pray with you again; it won't hurt. In fact, it's good practice to ask forgiveness for your sins every time you pray, just in case you did something without knowing it. If you're not familiar with church, I would suggest trying a protestant or independent variation where the music suits your taste *and* they adhere to the Bible. Some churches have small groups and relaxed dress, which I prefer because some people don't have fancy clothes. (* James 2:1-5)

As far as strangers go, you can let your light shine without saying a word when you're *kind to people* instead of being bitter, rude, and self-centered. Just kidding; maybe you weren't those things but being 'saved' will make you a '*new person*' with a *new attitude* towards '*life with Christ*'. Hopefully, your family will see the *improvement* and be supportive of your choices. If not, 'letting your light shine' means 'leading by example'.

How to gain God's respect ... added 3-23-2015

When I was a teenager, I heard a preacher explain that there were two kinds of success in the world. 1. There's the kind that the world sees as success, which involves money, material things, and power. 2. Then, there's the kind that God sees as success, which is totally different. Jesus said, "*What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.*" (Luke 16:15)

To illustrate my point, this is one of my favorite verses in the whole Bible. I found it because Gabriel referred to Daniel as "highly esteemed". (Daniel 9:23) The word 'esteemed' means 'highly respected' or 'put on a pedestal' so, coming from God, that was high praise. Daniel may have learned from reading *Isaiah* because God actually explained what it takes to be esteemed.

Isaiah 66:2

"This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.

I like it because it's simple: just 3 things to gain the respect of the almighty creator. What? To me, that was almost unimaginable but it was sure worth a try. Notice that all three things involve *internal feelings*, not external deeds. No one will know your progress except you and God.

1 Samuel 16:7 (God said)

The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the **LORD looks at the heart.**"

1. Humility is resisting the *natural urge* to seek recognition from others in exchange for seeking *recognition from God*. (It's not as easy as it sounds.)

Matthew 6:1-4 (Jesus said)

"**Be careful** not to do your '**acts of righteousness**' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have **no reward from your Father in heaven**. 2 "So when you give to the needy, **do not announce it with trumpets**, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in **secret**. **Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.**"

2. 'Contrite in spirit' means '*deeply sorry* for having done wrong'. No human deserves to go to heaven but God is offering salvation as *free gift* to all those who love and obey His Son, Jesus. Such a generous gift can never be equaled so all we can do is accept it and be eternally grateful.

3. 'Trembles at His word' does not require that you understand everything in the Bible but you must *believe deeply* that everything is *true* and He will follow through on His promises, *both good and bad*. God is loving and kind but He will not let the guilty go unpunished.

When you think about it, there are some pretty amazing stories in the Bible so if a person believes them *whole-heartedly*, they *should* tremble.

However, notice the irony when Jesus tells everyone to '*be very afraid*' and then says "*Don't be afraid*". In other words, if God has your back, you don't have to fear *anything*.

Luke 12:4-7

4 "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. 5 But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. **Yes, I tell you, fear him.** 6 Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. 7 Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. **Don't be afraid**; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Step 3: Pray

I've already mentioned prayer a couple of times but this is more about "how to pray".


Jesus said, "When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then, your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (Matthew 6: 6-8)

In other words, God knows what you *need* before you ask, but you still have to pray. And don't get discouraged if you don't get everything you ask for. Why, you say?

1. God does things in His own timing, not yours, so *be patient*.
2. 'God's will' must be done, not yours. However, if you pray with *persistence*, you might *make* it God's will. (Luke 18: 1-8) It takes 'faith' but don't give up.
3. James said, "You do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." (James 4:3)

Jesus said, "What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight." (Luke 16:15) In other words, don't expect a lot of material things that you don't really need. *You might find, as you mature, that your desires align more with God's desires and you get more of what you ask for. In the meantime, ask away. It won't hurt.

If you pray regularly, you might find yourself running out of things to say but don't worry because God is not impressed by many words. Jesus gave us an example:

 Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. (Matt. 6:9-13)

1. Notice that almost half is just **praise**. And that's always a good place to start because there's plenty to praise God about.
2. Then, there's a **request for daily blessings** because we should all pray daily. Think about the manna in the desert. It had to be collected daily. (Ex.16:4)
3. Then, there's **forgiveness of sin** but only if we **forgive others**.

Jesus added, "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." (Matt. 6: 14-15)

That may be more difficult in some cases than others but remember: forgiveness comes from the *heart*, not the mind. In other words, you can forgive the *offence* without forgetting the pain. Sure, they don't *deserve* to be forgiven but neither do we. Yet, God forgives us *anyway*, so we must do the same, especially if they ask. (Lu.17:3)

4. Then, there's a **request for strength and protection** against temptation and Satan. (Prayer is kind-of like an insurance policy against bad stuff happening but the policy has to be renewed, at least daily, for maximum protection.)

Also, the 'Lord's Prayer' is just a pattern. I don't think it's a good idea to just repeat the same thing all the time. I usually cover the four things above but not every time. I generally add personal things in the middle, end, or both. Sometimes, it's good just to be silent and think about God. Sometimes, one of the hardest things about prayer is just blocking out all the worries and concerns about life (see 3). If that problem persists, you may just have too much on your plate and need to clear some time for God. I suggest relaxing with some praise music. Music does wonders for your spirit.

Step 4: Read God's Word

The apostle, John, one of Jesus' closest companions, wrote very simply, "God is love". When you break it down, all God wants is our love. Yet, if you love someone, don't you usually want to find out more about them: their past, present, maybe even their future. Well, God has provided all that in His Holy Word for everyone to learn and enjoy.

John said, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" (John 1: 1)

There's no better way to get to know God than to get to know His Word.

Yet, *you* have to make the *first step*. God will meet you half-way; I guarantee.

James wrote, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." (James 4:8)

Reading the Bible is important because it builds 'faith', which helps build your 'root'. The Bible is the only place to find knowledge, which leads to wisdom and understanding.

Solomon said, "*Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.*" (Proverbs 3: 13-14)

Pointers for beginners:

If you have never tried reading the Bible because it looks so big, just take it one book at a time. You don't have to read them in order either. For new Christians, I would suggest the New Testament. Sometimes, it's best to get your feet wet with a short book and work your way up. Paul's short letters such as Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, etc, are great for new Christians and they were some of the first to be written anyway. Peter, James, and 1st John, etc, are 'short' but packed with great advice. Finishing some short books, first, will give you faith and confidence to tackle some longer ones.

The *Book of Mark* was likely the first gospel and it cuts straight to John the Baptist. *Matthew* and *Luke* goes back to Jesus' birth. *John* is totally different. I think because it was written later and John was trying to *add* information, not repeat everything again.

The *Books of Luke, Acts, and Romans* make a good trilogy that goes all the way from Jesus' birth to the end of Paul's ministry. I suggest reading those back-to-back. Buy a good highlighter so you can go back and see what caught your attention most.

Step 5: Remove temptations.

Peter said, "For you have spent **enough time** in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you **do not plunge with them** into the same flood of dissipation, and **they heap abuse on you**. But **they** will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead." (1 Peter 4: 3-5)

In other words, some friends may resist your desire to change and tempt you on purpose. They might even be *insulting* but stand strong; don't let *your* faith and salvation depend on *theirs*. (seed 2)

Jesus said, "**Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me**. Rejoice and be glad, because **great is your reward in heaven**, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5: 11-12)

Depending on your situation and personality, you might be able to influence some of your old friends but you can't force them to change if they don't want to. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is let your light shine and lead by example. Yet, if they don't follow, you might have to distance yourself, pray, and have patience. Don't let yourself become angry and condemning; that won't help either of you. If your old friends see that the change in you is *positive* (general attitude), then that could be better than words.

Step 6. Watch your tongue.

Jesus said, "Men will have to **give account** on the Day of Judgment for **every careless word** they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and **by your words you will be condemned**." (Matt. 12: 36-37)

What? Can that be right? Aren't we judged by our sins? Why does He say words? When you think about it, words can hurt people just like sin, and last even longer.

Solomon said, "Reckless words pierce like a sword but the tongue of the wise brings healing." (Proverbs 12:18)

Another reason that we will be judged by our *words* is that they show exactly what is in our heart ... and we will be judged by our *heart*.

Jesus said, "**Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks**". (Matt. 12:34)

Step 7: Bear some fruit – Produce a crop (seed 4)

Jesus said, "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. **Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down** and thrown into the fire. (Matt 7:18-19)

Does that mean a person is required to perform 'deeds' and 'earn' salvation?

Absolutely not. The 'fruit' Jesus is talking about is the 'fruit of the Spirit' that comes from your *heart* (like your words).

Paul said, "But the fruit of the Spirit is **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.** Against such things, there is no law." (Gal. 5:22-23)

In other words, the Spirit is not about a bunch of rules. That was the main thing that Jesus criticized the Pharisees about. They made a bunch of picky rules that made them 'look' righteous but they forgot about '**love**', which is most important. As Paul points out below, even the most radical deeds are useless without 'love'.

Paul said, "If I **give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.** Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth." (1 Cor. 13: 3-6)

Does that mean a person can get 'saved' and do *nothing*? **Not necessarily.**

Let me explain. On one hand, 'reading the Bible' is *something*. 'Prayer' is *something*. But as you do these things on a regular basis, to build your faith, you will naturally mature and want to do *other things*: to show your love for God. In other words, **Christians do good things because they want to, not because they have to.**

Matthew 25:37-40 (end of a parable)

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'"

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, **whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.**'"

Final words of encouragement:

As I said, Christianity is both simple and complex but if you follow these steps, I'm confident you'll succeed. After all, everyone had to start from scratch, sometime. And if you think you're not important to God, think again.

Jesus said, "*There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.*" (Luke 15:7)

And God knows you won't be perfect because He gives you multiple chances.

Jesus said, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you **seven times in a day**, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent', forgive him." (Luke 17:3-4)

The main thing is to keep '*practicing*' God's Word because that builds wisdom.

Jesus said, "*Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into **practice** is like a **wise man** who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet, **it did not fall**, because it had its **foundation on the rock.***" (Matt. 7: 24-25)

Peter's Maturity Scale

Basic definition of Maturity

2 Peter 1:4-8

4 ... He has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may **participate in the divine nature** and **escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.**

5 **For this very reason**, make every effort to **add to your faith** -goodness; and to goodness, *knowledge*; 6 and to knowledge, *self-control*; and to self-control, *perseverance*; and to perseverance, *godliness*; 7 and to godliness, *brotherly kindness*; and to brotherly kindness, **love**.

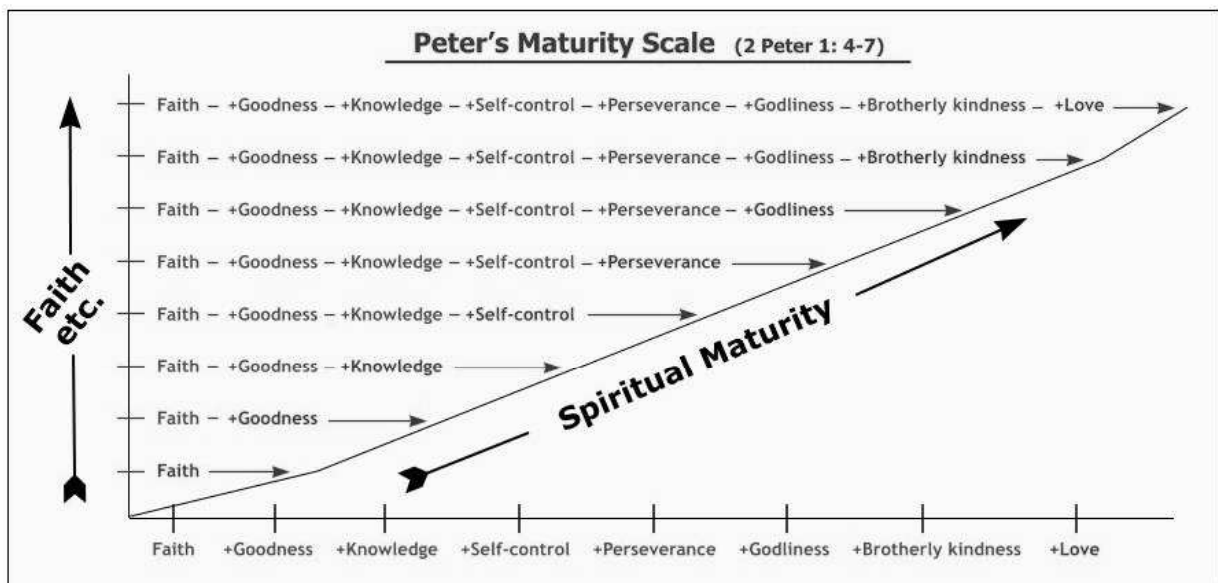
8 For if you possess these qualities in **increasing measure**, they will **keep you from being ineffective and unproductive** in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In other words, keep **adding to you faith** to become **mature and productive**.

Below the chart, I briefly connect Peter's instructions to my steps above.

In general, **maturity takes time** because you're "building faith", each time you add a level. As illustrated below, 'all' of these qualities increase '**proportionally**' as you mature.

In other words, you don't maintain the same amount of '**faith**' because you become '**more certain**' as you gain '**more knowledge**' and everything else.



Observations:

- Faith** is the 'root' of everything because it's impossible to please God without faith. (Heb. 11:6)
- Goodness** is the 'initial change' experienced by all Christians because we are a 'new creation'. (2 Cor. 5:17)
Notice that 'knowledge' is not even necessary for this step because it's just 'common sense goodness'.
- Knowledge** is the basic building block of 'faith'. (Rom. 10:17) You can't go any higher without 'knowledge' of God's Word.
- Self-control** is *forth* because you can't get there until you gain enough 'knowledge' to know what's important not to do. As I said, God knows you will make mistakes but they will diminish as you mature and your 'spirit' gets stronger.
- Perseverance** is "holding onto one's faith" in times of trouble or persecution. Notice that it's achieved *after* mastering 'self-control' (words and actions), which gets you closer to God, so you can resist the devil. (James 4:7)
- Godliness** is when your desires begin to align with God's and you start to see what His perfect will is for your life. (Rom. 12:2)
- Brotherly kindness** is 'doing things for others', *not* because you *have to*, but because you *want to*. (step 7)
Notice how high this step is. This is different from simple 'goodness'. It takes sufficient 'faith', 'knowledge', and 'godliness' to know how God wants you to 'serve'. Then, you might be led to do something in church or somewhere else. Remember: It takes *all* parts of the body and **no part is more important than the others**. (1 Cor. 12:14-26)
- Love** is the final step but this is *not* an 'ordinary love'.

John said, "Greater love has no one than this: **that he lay down his life for his friends.**" (John 15:13)

Paul said, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God **demonstrates his own love** for us in this: **While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**" (Romans 5:7-8)

As you can see, Peter's scale goes *all the way to the top*. I am always encouraged when someone forgives a person on death row. That takes a lot of maturity. Yet, how many would take that prisoner's place? **Jesus did**.