

Spiritual Growth and Spiritual Decline

Some people appear to be "spiritual," but later turn away from the faith. Other people appear to be weak or "unspiritual," but later become strong in the faith. Both of these situations show us that things are not always what they may appear to be.

Examples of each are given in Scripture, in order that we may be encouraged, as well as warned. We should not give-up on people, simply because they do not constantly display the strength of spiritual maturity. On the other hand, we should not be surprised that there are counterfeits who appear, for a while, to be spiritual, but who then depart from the faith.

[There are also people - even church leaders - who *claim* to belong to God, but whose actions prove otherwise. These people are not our focus here, but two passages that refer to such people are: Titus 1:16 and Matthew 7:15-27.]

The examples of Demas and Mark have been chosen, because both of them are mentioned together in three passages: Colossians 4:10, 14; Philemon 1:23-24; 2 Timothy 4:9-12.

"Departing Demas"

- A warning that counterfeits can look genuine, for a while.

Jesus makes reference to people who temporarily "believe," but who later fall away, when circumstances get difficult - Matthew 13:20-21. The apostle John also refers to them and explains that their departure indicates that they never actually belonged to Jesus - 1 John 2:18-19. Demas fits this description perfectly.

- **Colossians 4:14; Philemon 1:23-24**

In these passages, we see that Demas is a "fellow worker" with the apostle Paul. At this point, the average person would have considered him to be spiritually mature... after all, he capable of working side-by-side with Paul! And if you asked him about his salvation, he would have probably replied with confidence, "Yes, I am a Christian."

- **2 Timothy 4:9-12**

This passage was probably written 5 to 10 years later. Persecution had increased. Paul was in prison and expecting to be put to death soon. At this point, Demas' true nature expressed itself: His love for the world (and its values) proved to be greater than his love for Christ. Because of this, he abandoned Paul. (There were others who, for various reasons, also left Paul, but only Demas is described as doing so for this reason.)

Though Demas originally had an *appearance* of spiritual maturity, he had a love for the world that never got "crucified with Christ" (Galatians 5:24; 6:14; Matthew 16:24-26; 1 John 2:15-17). Since "no man can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24), that deep-rooted love for the world eventually proved stronger than the superficial, "skin deep" love he had for Christ.

"Maturing Mark" ("John Mark" in Acts 12:12)

- An encouragement for us to not give-up on people who are spiritually weak.

People are not *born* completely mature; rather they need to *grow* into maturity. So it is with spiritual maturity: We are told to *grow up* in our salvation - 1 Peter 2:2; 2 Peter 3:18.

Because of this, there may be times in which a person may act "spiritually childish," and those who are stronger may need to encourage him and help him to grow up - Romans 15:1-2; 1 Thessalonians 5:11. (Of course, those who are stronger must remember that they, also, are capable of being tempted with sin - Galatians 6:1-2. They are not "superiors" to the one who is weak.)

Even the apostle Peter had moments of weakness - such as seen in Matthew 26:69-75 and Galatians 2:11-14. But these were momentary expressions of weakness, and were not the normal "fruit" of his life. (Otherwise, he would *not* have been considered a disciple of Jesus.)

We need to remember that growth is not merely an "option"; it's a necessity. The person who *doesn't* mature (grow-up) should be concerned about whether or not he has truly chosen to follow Jesus. A person who is unwilling to abandon the fruitless ways of the world (compare to Luke 8:14) will *never* be able to live the life of a disciple (= Christian).

- **Acts 13:13 (John = Mark; see 12:25); 15:37-38**
Originally, Mark was spiritually weak and a "quitter." He may have had a desire to help in the work of ministry, but he didn't have the necessary character or strength to continue on to the end of the mission. Because of this, Paul did not consider him qualified to join him on a second mission.
- **Acts 15:39**
Barnabas (Mark's cousin - Colossians 4:10) thought that Mark should be given another opportunity. Paul and Barnabas were probably *both* correct, but looking at the issue from different perspectives. In the end, they went separate ways, with Barnabas taking Mark with him. Barnabas was gifted with the ability to encourage others (Acts 4:36), so he most likely worked with Mark, encouraged him and helped him to grow.
- **Colossians 4:10; Philemon 1:23-24; 2 Timothy 4:11**
The encouragement Mark may have received from Barnabas was definitely not in vain! In these last three passages, we read that Mark is once again working with Paul. By the end of Paul's ministry, in contrast with Demas (who had departed and gone after the world), Paul praises Mark for his usefulness.

[Two other items of potential interest, about Mark: 1) Many theologians believe that the anonymous person mentioned in Mark 14:51-52 was Mark himself, recording a personal event that had occurred immediately after Jesus had been betrayed and arrested. 2) Many indications suggest that Mark and the apostle Peter spent much time working together. In 1 Peter 5:13, Peter calls Mark his "son" - perhaps indicating his role in helping Mark to grow spiritually.]