

**THE 5  
STAGES OF**

**SPIRITUAL  
MATURITY**



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While Jesus was here on earth, He gave us a model of leadership to follow. He lived alongside His disciples for three years as they watched and helped Him minister to those in the communities they traveled through. He used His relationship with them to show them what to do, then He engaged their help, and eventually He sent them out to minister, and He debriefed with them when they were done. This reproducible process of Relational Discipleship that Jesus modeled for us is timeless. It transcends geographical and cultural barriers. This process does not require a Bible degree or complete knowledge of every spiritual issue. You are able to disciple another, no matter where you are in the process, to the level of maturity you yourself have reached. In order to lead the people we are discipling toward a specific destination, we do need to have been there ourselves or at least have a map.



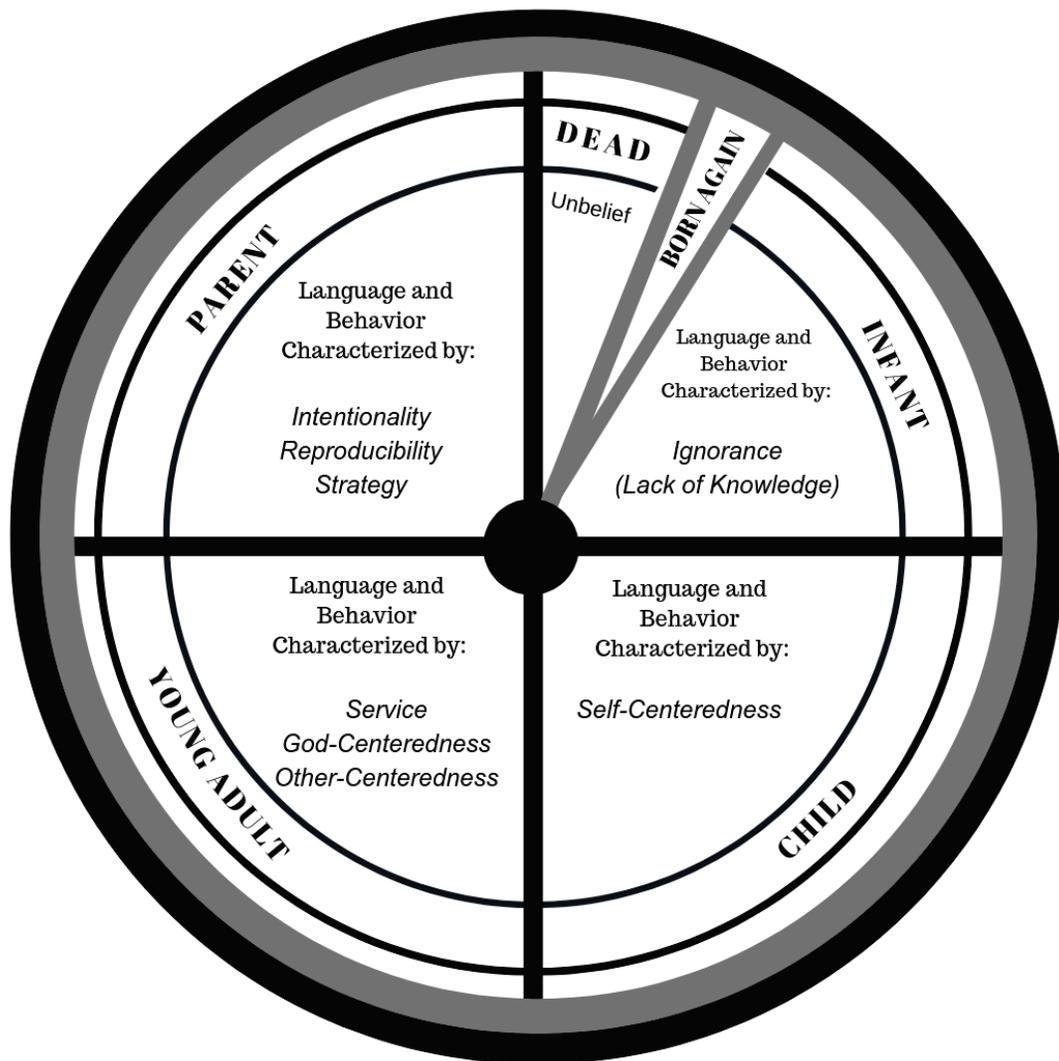
The destination of Spiritual Maturity is to become like Jesus. This is not something we will achieve on this earth, but it is the goal we should be striving for. He is our ultimate example of what maturity looks like. Being spiritually mature means we seek to understand the heart of God and seek to love what and whom He loves. And the end result of discipleship is a disciple who is making other disciples.

As intentional disciple-makers, it is important for us to evaluate where our disciples are on their spiritual journey so that we can determine what they need from us. In order to do this well, we must be in relationship with them. As a disciple-maker, our role is to help the disciple mature and grow so he can move from one stage of development to the next, so that he can eventually disciple others. Time and proximity enable us to get to know the maturity level of the person we are discipling and where he needs to grow.



# THE DISCIPLESHIP WHEEL: THE 5 STAGES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

We want people to see spiritual growth as a natural part of their Christian journey, so we tie it all together by teaching the five stages of a disciple's spiritual life.



Every person is born into this world spiritually dead. Those who receive Jesus are born again. The Holy Spirit moves in, and they become spiritual infants. As they grow and mature, they move from the infant stage to the child stage, to the young adult stage, and finally to the parent stage in which they

disciple someone else through these same stages. The plumb line that Spiritual Maturity is always to be measured against is Jesus. He is the one perfect example of a mature disciple-maker. We recognize that none of us will ever reach that goal in this life, but it is the target we should all be aiming for.

# STAGE 1: SPIRITUALLY DEAD

This stage of spiritual maturity can take many different forms. The person who is spiritually dead may have a complete disbelief in the supernatural, or a belief in many forms of the supernatural. They may believe there is no God, or they may believe in many gods. They may even believe there is one God, but many different ways to get to him. They may be confused about God, Jesus, and the church, or they may have anger towards them. You might see them seeking for worldly fulfillment in things like prestige, power or fame. They may hold the belief that since they are good people who have not done bad things, if there is a higher being or a place like heaven they will be good. Or they may believe that they have done so many bad things in their life, if there is a God he would reject them anyway. Remember that every person is unique. The things they believe have been influenced by their upbringing and their culture. In order to share our faith with them, we need to build an ongoing relationship. As we do, we will discover their reasons for not being a Christian, or their misconceptions of what that looks like, so that we have a better understanding of what they need from us.



When someone is a spiritually dead, their words and their actions reveal it. Here are some of the typical things you might hear the spiritually dead say:

- I just don't believe there is a God
- The Bible is just a bunch of myths
- Evolution and science explain away a need for God
- Christians are responsible for all the wars in history - why would I be a part of that?
- There are many ways to get to God
- I have been a good person, so I will be okay
- If there is a hell, I'd rather be there and party with my friends.

Everyone is a creation of God, but not everyone is a child of God.

"But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God." John 1:12

God wants all to hear the good news and come to Him. The person who does not have the Holy Spirit cannot understand spiritual things. They need someone to share the Truth with them. Here are some of the things the spiritually dead need from us:

- A secure relationship with a more mature believer
- A picture of the real Jesus lived out in front of them
- Answers and evidence for Christianity
- An explanation of the gospel message
- An invitation to receive Christ

# STAGE 2: INFANT

When it comes to the physical realm, we can determine if someone is an infant just by looking at them. It is not that easy in the spiritual realm. When someone is born again, at whatever physical age they may be, they begin their life as a spiritual infant. The process of becoming more like Jesus has just begun. Sometimes someone who has been a Christian for a long time can be stuck at this stage. They never grew up spiritually after they were saved. Disciple-makers cooperate with God to help these infants grow.

The word that describes this stage best is ignorance and dependence. They do not know much about biblical truth and they may mix cultural beliefs with Christianity because they don't know any better. They are dependent because they cannot accomplish growth alone any more than a baby can feed and care for himself the day he comes home from the hospital.

Spiritual infants need to begin to learn about Christ and the Bible for the first time. It is important that they see mature believers living the discipleship lifestyle so they can imitate these behaviors.



When someone is a spiritual infant, their words and their actions reveal it. Here are some of the typical things you might hear a spiritual infant say:

- Why do I need to go to church regularly?  
I really don't have time for that.
- I've been hurt by people, so I would rather it just be me and God.
- If I pray and read my Bible, will I be good enough?
- I don't really have time for church.
- I'm a good person, certainly better than some others I know.
- Is Karma real?
- Does God let dead people come back and give us messages?

Both physical babies and spiritual infants need someone to care for them and feed them in order for them to grow and thrive.

In 1 Peter 2:2 Peter remarks; "As newborn babies, you must crave pure spiritual milk."

Paul gave us a model in 1 Thessalonians 2:6-8 of meeting the spiritual needs of infants. From this passage, some of their spiritual needs are:

- The personal attention of a disciple-maker/spiritual parent
- Care and protection during this vulnerable stage of discipleship
- Teaching and modeling the new truths of the Christian faith
- Developing new habits that become the rhythms they will live by as disciples

# STAGE 3: CHILD

Again, be careful not to mistake Bible knowledge alone, years of attendance, physical age, or appearance for spiritual maturity. Some spiritually immature people have been in church 60 years or more, and some spiritually mature disciples have been Christians for only a few years.

Spiritual infants typically see Christianity on the basis of "It's just me and Jesus"; while a spiritual child will have at least made a basic connection to the spiritual family. All spiritual children have these characteristics in common.

**Self-Centeredness:** Children tend to interpret everything from the perspective of "me". Spiritual children are often more concerned about their needs than the needs of others.

**Idealism:** Children tend to be black and white in their thinking, as well as naive. They might think disciples can only listen to Christian music, or read nothing except the Bible. When they apply their idealism to how other Christians should live, it can be disappointing and legalistic.

**Over/Under Confidence:** Spiritual children tend to move back and forth on a confidence continuum. Overconfidence manifests as pride. Underconfidence can become self-loathing and defeat. Without intentional guidance from a more mature disciple, spiritual children may swing back and forth.



When someone is a spiritual child, their words and their actions reveal it. Here are some of the typical things you might hear a spiritual child say:

- Don't branch my group into two groups! It is comfortable for me the way it is.
- This church is getting too big - who are all these new people coming in?
- I didn't like the worship music today, why can't they just play.....
- I am not being fed at my church; I'm going to go to a church that meets my needs.
- The Pastor walked right by me today without even saying hello.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12, Paul speaks of treating the readers as his own "children". In 1 Timothy 1:1-2 he refers to Timothy as his "son". And in Philemon 1:8-11 He makes an appeal for Philemon, calling him his "own son". These verses make it clear that Paul was a disciple-maker who intentionally invested in people who were less spiritually mature.

Here are some of the spiritual needs of a child:

- A relational connection to a church family
- Help to start feeding themselves spiritually
- Teaching about who they are in Christ and how to have a relationship with Him
- Modeling of how to be in relationship with other believers

# STAGE 4: YOUNG ADULT

Stages of growth are all around us. Jesus experienced this physical process as He went from infancy to adulthood. God designed spiritual growth to develop in stages too. He doesn't transform us instantly into mature disciples after conversion.

The young adult stage covers a wide span of growth. A spiritual young adult is beginning to see that God shaped them for a purpose. A key characteristic is that they become more others-focused. As their priorities begin to change, they are looking for a place to serve others where they can use their abilities and gifts. They are willing to make the sacrifice that is required to serve. As they become more secure in who they are in Christ, they are able to overlook the faults of others. They are often action-oriented, zealous, and in need of a way to get involved in ministry.

You will see spiritual infants and children get involved in ministry, but they will usually only serve as long as the personal benefit to them outweighs the cost. A young adult will serve for the glory of God and the good of others, even if it takes them outside their comfort zone.

Young adults have the desire to serve, but they are not yet strategic about how to train others. They can also be somewhat naive about other believers - thinking that they are doing great in their spiritual life because they say they are "fine" when they are at church.



When someone is a spiritual young adult, their words and their actions reveal it. Here are some of the typical things you might hear a spiritual young adult say:

- I love my small group, but there are others who need a group like this.
- I came across something in my devotions that I have a question about.
- Look at how many are in church today - I had to park a block away! This is awesome!
- I've noticed we don't have a welcome team, could I help get one started?
- A family in our group is all sick this week; I will take them a meal and get others to do so, too.

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." Romans 12:10-13

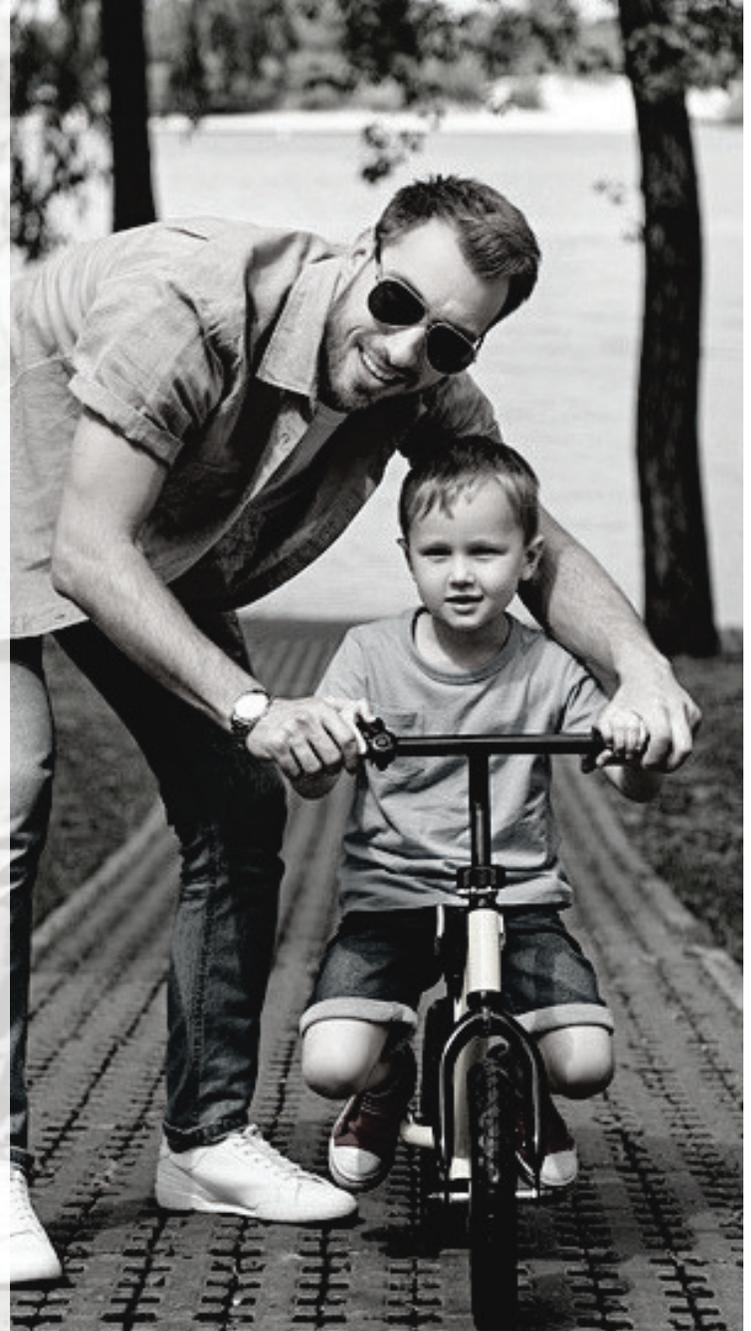
Here are some of the spiritual needs of a young adult:

- A place to learn how to serve
- A spiritual parent who will debrief experiences with them
- Ongoing relationships that offer encouragement and accountability
- Help with identifying their gifts

# STAGE 5: PARENT

This is the last stage of a disciple's growth. We use the word parent rather than adult because a parent is someone that has a child. Spiritual parents also reproduce. They intentionally make other disciples who go on to make disciples. Disciples do not need to wait until they are fully mature to make other disciples, but intentional disciple-making is a characteristic of spiritual parents.

Spiritual parents fulfill the command to make disciples. They intentionally build relationships that lead others to follow Jesus. They help their disciple grow as they prepare to release them to disciple others. Spiritual parents understand the Bible enough to get their personal nourishment from it, and they also know how to give milk to spiritual infants who are just learning about God's Word. Spiritual parents feed themselves by doing things to keep God's Word in their minds, including these habits; regularly reading and memorizing the Bible, listening to sermons, studying the Bible, and regularly discussing scripture with other disciples. They are team players committed to seeing the church accomplish its mission. They are keenly aware of their own personal ministry. They work to help the body of Christ be a powerful force for accomplishing the parts of the tasks that require team effort.



When someone is a spiritual parent, their words and their actions reveal it. Here are some of the typical things you might hear a spiritual parent say:

- A guy at work asked me to explain the Bible to him. Please pray for me.
- We baptized a person from my small group this week! Now I need to get her plugged into ministry.
- I know discipleship starts at home, will you hold me accountable to spend time discipling my kids?
- Our small group is going to do a service project in our community. I've assigned each member a different role.

"I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children. Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel." 1 Corinthians 4:14-15

Here are some of the spiritual needs of a parent:

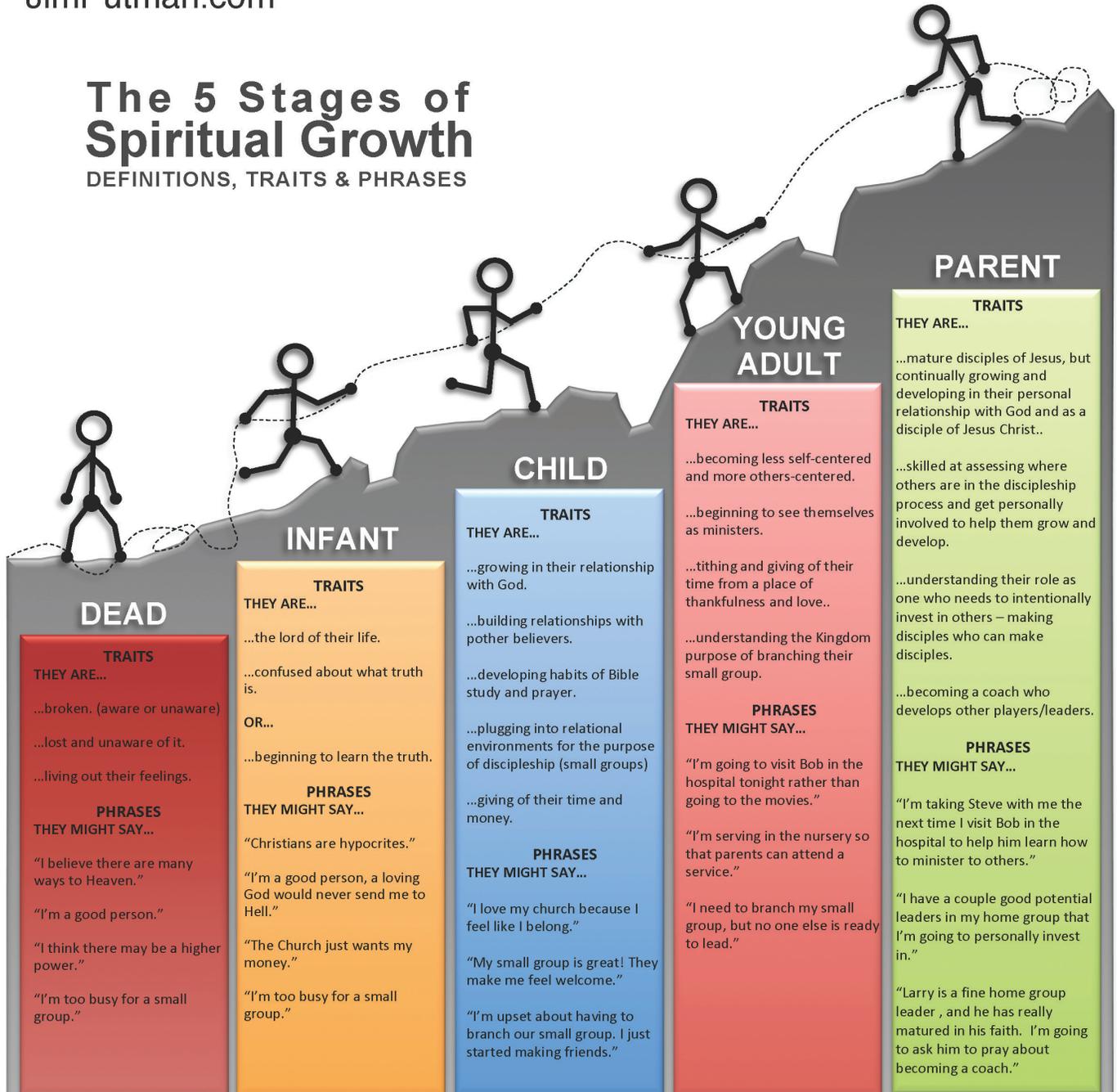
- An ongoing relationship with other disciple makers
- A church family - so they can discipleship people as part of a team
- Peer accountability and encouragement

# 5 STAGES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH GRAPHIC

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## The 5 Stages of Spiritual Growth

DEFINITIONS, TRAITS & PHRASES



**SPIRITUALLY DEAD:** People in this stage have not yet accepted Christ as Lord and Savior. They may completely reject God, they may be seeking God, they may be "spiritual", they may even claim to know God or be a Christian, when in reality, they are their own god.

**SPIRITUAL INFANT:** In this stage, people have accepted Christ, but haven't moved much past that point. They can be new believers or they might be stagnant, long-time Christians. Life is generally all about them and their needs.

**SPIRITUAL CHILD:** In this stage, people are growing in their relationship with God and are also beginning to grow in their relationship with other Christians. They are applying God's Word in their life and allowing others to walk beside them in their journey following Christ. However, it's still mostly about them – their needs, comfort, etc.

**SPIRITUAL YOUNG ADULT:** In this stage, people are making a big shift from being self-centered to more others-centered. They're beginning to understand their role as a giver, rather than a taker – ministering to others, putting others first – being doers of the Word.

**SPIRITUAL PARENT:** In this stage, the Parent has a solid understanding of God's Word and a deep, abiding relationship with the Father. They are living out God's Word in their lives daily. They are others-centered and God-dependent. They are able to reproduce mature disciples of Christ by inviting others to follow them as they follow Christ.

**DEAD**

**TRAITS THEY ARE...**

- ...broken. (aware or unaware)
- ...lost and unaware of it.
- ...living out their feelings.

**PHRASES THEY MIGHT SAY...**

- "I believe there are many ways to Heaven."
- "I'm a good person."
- "I think there may be a higher power."
- "I'm too busy for a small group."

**INFANT**

**TRAITS THEY ARE...**

- ...the lord of their life.
- ...confused about what truth is.

**OR...**

- ...beginning to learn the truth.

**PHRASES THEY MIGHT SAY...**

- "Christians are hypocrites."
- "I'm a good person, a loving God would never send me to Hell."
- "The Church just wants my money."
- "I'm too busy for a small group."

**CHILD**

**TRAITS THEY ARE...**

- ...growing in their relationship with God.
- ...building relationships with other believers.
- ...developing habits of Bible study and prayer.
- ...plugging into relational environments for the purpose of discipleship (small groups)
- ...giving of their time and money.

**PHRASES THEY MIGHT SAY...**

- "I love my church because I feel like I belong."
- "My small group is great! They make me feel welcome."
- "I'm upset about having to branch our small group. I just started making friends."

**YOUNG ADULT**

**TRAITS THEY ARE...**

- ...becoming less self-centered and more others-centered.
- ...beginning to see themselves as ministers.
- ...tithing and giving of their time from a place of thankfulness and love..
- ...understanding the Kingdom purpose of branching their small group.

**PHRASES THEY MIGHT SAY...**

- "I'm going to visit Bob in the hospital tonight rather than going to the movies."
- "I'm serving in the nursery so that parents can attend a service."
- "I need to branch my small group, but no one else is ready to lead."

**PARENT**

**TRAITS THEY ARE...**

- ...mature disciples of Jesus, but continually growing and developing in their personal relationship with God and as a disciple of Jesus Christ..
- ...skilled at assessing where others are in the discipleship process and get personally involved to help them grow and develop.
- ...understanding their role as one who needs to intentionally invest in others – making disciples who can make disciples.
- ...becoming a coach who develops other players/leaders.

**PHRASES THEY MIGHT SAY...**

- "I'm taking Steve with me the next time I visit Bob in the hospital to help him learn how to minister to others."
- "I have a couple good potential leaders in my home group that I'm going to personally invest in."
- "Larry is a fine home group leader, and he has really matured in his faith. I'm going to ask him to pray about becoming a coach."

# Things To Consider

Before I leave you, I would like to warn you to be careful when using this visual and these terms. Avoid thinking that any of the stages of spiritual growth imply a greater worth. A parent is no more valuable than an infant. All levels make up the family of God, and all are precious and valuable in His sight. A parent who thinks he has "arrived" spiritually is headed for a fall from pride. If anything, more growth results in greater responsibility - this is where the work really begins.

This was created to be a useful internal tool to help you identify and determine where the person you are discipling is in their growth and what they need from you to move towards the next stage. It is by no means to be used as a weapon or method to impose guilt on others.

As Jesus' disciples today, we share our lives with other people which leads to sharing the good news about Jesus and what He has done for us. Then, we move to connect them with Jesus and with other believers in relationship through the church. Next, we help them grow as disciples by providing a place for them to minister in Jesus' name within their church and community. Then, when they are ready, we deploy them and release them to disciple others in the same way. This is what we call the discipleship process.

Through this process that Jesus modeled for His disciples, the world came to know about Him. At Real Life Ministries, our vision is to continue to reach the world for Jesus - one person at a time using His process of relational discipleship.

I hope this booklet will be a useful tool for you in your discipleship journey. If you would like to learn more on the topic of discipleship, you will find articles, podcasts, books, and more at [JimPutman.com](http://JimPutman.com)

***Click below to go to some of my website posts and podcasts on this topic:***

What Does Spiritual Maturity Look Like? Jim Putman - Podcast

4 Enlightening Questions To Ask The People You Are Discipling

6 Habits Of An Effective Disciple Maker

# JIM PUTMAN

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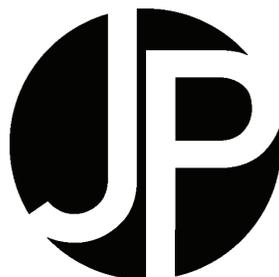
Jim Putman is the co-founder and Senior Pastor of Real Life Ministries in Post Falls, Idaho. Prior to his role as senior pastor, he served as a youth minister in two small churches. In college, Jim won three All American titles in wrestling and went on to become a successful wrestling coach.

Real Life was launched in 1998 with a commitment to discipleship and the model of discipleship Jesus practiced, which is called, "Relational Discipleship." Outreach Magazine continually lists Real Life Ministries among the top one hundred most influential churches in America. Jim is also a co-founder and leader with the Relational Discipleship Network.

Jim holds degrees from Boise State University and Boise Bible College. His voice reaches hundreds of thousands across the world through speaking conferences, the web, radio, and weekend services.

He is the author of three books: Church is a Team Sport (2008), Real-Life Discipleship (2010), and The Power of Together (2016). He also co-authored three books with others: Real-Life Discipleship Training Manual (2010) (with Avery Willis, Brandon Guindon, and Bill Krause), DiscipleShift (2013) (with Bobby Harrington and Robert Coleman) and Hope For The Prodigal (2017) (with Bill Putman)

Jim's passion is discipleship through small groups. With his background in sports and coaching, he believes in the value of strong coaching as a means to disciple others. He and his wife, along with their 3 sons, daughter-in-laws and 4 grandchildren, live in scenic North Idaho.



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