

[Opinion](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



(Unsplash/Erez Attias)



Thomas Reese

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@thomasreeseSJ](#)

Religion News Service

[View Author Profile](#)

## [Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 10, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Many people give up on religion when what they really need to do is change their image of God and how they relate to him. Too many people, when they grow older, give up on the God they learned about as children. What they really need to do is think about God in a more mature way.

This can be a crisis of faith for many people, especially young people who can no longer relate to the God they learned about as children. Too often, priests will tell them that this is a temptation. They are told to have greater faith. Hold on to their God and don't let go.

In truth, when someone is undergoing a crisis of faith, they may need to leave their old image of God for a new one. We need to change our understanding of God as we mature, just as we need to change our understanding of our parents as we mature.

Psychologists, like Erik Erikson, teach us that humans go through stages of development as they mature. The great Catholic mystics taught the same thing for centuries when they wrote of the purgative, contemplative and unitive ways. More recently, spiritual writers like James Fowler have used modern psychology to enrich our understanding of spiritual development.

My own simplified vision of spiritual development has three stages: turning away from sin, the practice of virtue and being embraced by God's love. These stages are not airtight compartments but more a matter of emphasis. All our lives involve turning away from sin and practicing virtue, but the emphasis will be different as we mature.

We need to change our understanding of God as we mature, just as we need to change our understanding of our parents as we mature.

[Tweet this](#)

Many of the greatest saints were first great sinners. They had to go through a conversion, reject sin, do penance and accept God's mercy.

Many Christian ministers put a great emphasis on this process, focusing on sin and the need for conversion in their preaching. Their God is a lawgiver and judge and sometimes even a policeman. God's wrath will fall on sinners, but his mercy will come to those who turn away from sin.

Pentecostals, Baptists and conservative Catholics are good at challenging sinners and calling them to repent. This approach can be especially successful in dealing with prisoners and those with addictions.

Knowing that God is watching can also keep ordinary Christians from falling into sin. The fear of getting caught and punished keeps many people from doing wrong. We are like children who behave because we don't want to be spanked.

The prayer life of a person at this stage of development is all about contrition, recognizing we are sinners and saying we are sorry. If we hear the [parable of the prodigal son](#), we identify with the prodigal and his brother, and how we are just like them. We spend a lot of time examining our conscience and listing all the sins we have committed in confession.

At this stage, God can sometimes come across as arbitrary and vindictive. When I was a child in the 1950s, we were taught that it was a mortal sin to eat meat on Friday or miss Mass on Sunday. Adolescents were told that they would go to hell if they enjoyed a "dirty thought." Wives were told to stick with their husbands, even in cases of abuse.

## Advertisement

For many, it seemed absurd to burn in hell alongside Hitler for eating a hamburger on Friday. This was a God who could be easily rejected.

At some point after turning away from serious sin, a Christian needs to move on from a focus on sin to a focus on the practice of virtue. If you are no longer a great sinner, it is time to move from the negative to the positive. We need to move from "How can I stop sinning?" to "How can I be a better Christian?" Scrupulosity is a sure

sign that it is time to move on.

In this second stage of spiritual development, God is not so much a judge as a coach. We ask him for help to be a better Christian. He urges us on to greater and greater virtue. When we pray and read the Gospels, we don't focus on sin, but on Jesus as the person we want to follow and imitate. "What can I do for the Lord?" "How can I be better?"

Most Christians spend most of their lives at this stage of spiritual development. We are not great sinners, but neither are we saints who practice the virtues perfectly. We try to be better but frequently fail. We don't pray well, we don't love as much as we should, we struggle and don't seem to get better.

This can get tiresome after a while. The coach wants us to run faster, but we know we are never going to win a gold medal. We begin to resent the coach for asking too much of us.

I sometimes think that the hardest act of faith is not to believe a particular dogma but to believe that God loves us unconditionally, that above, behind and in the universe is a benevolent God.

[Tweet this](#)

At this stage of development, we are like a teenager trying to win someone's love with the perfect clothes, hairstyle, makeup, conversation and social media. We are looking in the mirror all the time, not at the person we are with. By being good, we think we will earn God's love.

In the third stage of spiritual development, we focus not on ourselves but on God. We look less at the prodigal son and his brother than at their father. Many Scripture scholars call the story the parable of the [prodigal father](#) because of the love that he showers upon his sons.

When we look at Jesus in the Gospels, we see someone who will not just tell us to stop sinning and follow him. Rather he is someone who is wonderful and who tells us about his Father, who is loving and compassionate. In this stage of development, we are not looking for sin or ways to be better; we are looking at the Scriptures to learn how awesome and wonderful God is.

I sometimes think that the hardest act of faith is not to believe a particular dogma but to believe that God loves us unconditionally, that above, behind and in the universe is a benevolent God.

In each stage of spiritual development, our prayer life is different. In the first stage it is mostly contrition (I am sorry), in the second stage it is mostly petition (help me), and in the third stage it is mostly thanksgiving and adoration (you are amazing).

To truly fall in love, we must forget ourselves and focus on the person in front of us. God is amazing and we give thanks to him for all that he has done for us. In the final stage of spiritual development, we fall in love. We aren't good out of fear or to win God's love; we are loving and kind because God has first loved us.