

Text: 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

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Title: Maturity 101: Enjoy Fellowship

Six Joyful Labours of a Mature Christian

1. Enthusiasm in participation (2:17-20)

1st, Absence is hurtful

2nd, Absence makes the heart fonder

3rd, Absence demands a plan of action

4th Absence overcomes hindrances

5th, Absence anticipates joy

2. Unselfishness in service (3:1-2a)

3. Compassion in suffering (3:2b-4)

4. Accountability in temptation (3:5)

5. Exhilaration in maturity (3:6-9)

6. Intercession for shortcomings (3:10)

OPEN your Bibles to 1st Thess ch 2 as we continue our walk through this warm pastoral correspondence to a church known for its exemplary faith, love, and hope.

In our text for today Paul takes us on a tour of his own mind—in this case, all the positive, joyful, happy, and good thoughts about ministry and Christian living. He demonstrates from his own heart what joyful labour from one Christian to another Christian looks like. It is as though we are taken through some classes of the school on spiritual maturity. Every class has a different emphasis, but all of them are taught by mature Christians, helping us all along towards a spiritual maturity of our own.

Most Christians, either expressly so, or sometimes more subtly so by their actions, think a pastor is the professional Christian. They would never even enter a classroom on spiritual maturity, because that is where pastors go. They never stop to think that the pastor might be teaching the class, but the class is still filled with your average Christian. Maturity is for every Christian. The mature realise it and are eager to infect every Christian with maturity, but the immature never realise that maturity is for every Christian.

Paul let's us into his own mind, not so we can understand from a distance what a mature Christian is like, but so that we can imitate him. In fact, if you truly love the Lord Jesus with all your heart, you will be pleasantly surprised to see how many of Paul's maturity is already a part of your own soul! The things that make a pastor tick is no different than the things that make all true and mature Christian tick! A pastor is not the 'professional' Christian – he is probably just one of the more mature Christians. Do not confuse a hard-working pastor with a professional contractor that you pay to do the work. If you find a pastor who is getting his hands dirty with ministry work, it is no excuse for you to sit back, it is an example for you to follow!

That is exactly what Paul does in the last verses of 1st Thess ch 2 and all of ch 3. What makes a pastor labour joyfully in ministry? Paul will tell us all. *Why* does he tell us all? So we can increase in maturity as he himself did. Skip past our text

to ch 3:12 to see the connection that Paul makes between his own ministry and the ministry of the maturing believers in the church. READ 1 Thess 3:12 “... as we do for you”. Paul, the great Apostle and author of much of the NT, is in one sense, nothing else but an ordinary Christian who has matured spiritually and is calling all Christians to grow in the same way.

Today we are going to start the section that begins in 2:17 and ends in 3:10. You could add the last three verses of ch 3 too, but, because of the loaded phrases in that benedictory wish, we will look at them separately from the rest. In 2:17 to 3:10 we see what makes a pastor labour so joyfully in ministry, and what makes every mature Christian labour so joyfully in ministry. These are things that are true for every mature Christian, because maturity is for every Christian.

Our outline for this entire passage, which will span a few weeks, is this: Six Joyful Labours of a Mature Christian. I call them *labours* because these qualities do not simply pop into existence one day when you feel more spiritual. Maturity is hard work. But I call them “*joyful labours*” because, as you will see when we read the text together, these labours pay more dividends than anything else in life. As much as maturing in your faith will require sacrificial commitment, intentional participation, deliberate effort, and steadfast perseverance; the joy, honour, glory, and worthiness of maturity will far outweigh all the labour you put in.

These joyful labours describe Paul’s heart and the heart of every faithful pastor. But, the context of these verses is what every Christian should be. What makes ch 3 different from chs 1 and 2 is that Paul uses ch 3 to describe who he is as a Christian, not just what he does as an Apostle. READ 1 Thess 2:17-3:13. Six joyful labours of a mature Christian, with a closing prayer on maturity at the end.

The 1st joyful labour of a mature Christian, and this is the only one we will get to today, is:

1. Enthusiasm in participation (2:17-20)

There are many degrees of participation among Christians, but every mature Christian is always enthusiastic in participation with other Christians. Even in our most depressing of times in our lives, the fellowship of the saints is still the anticipated highlight of such weeks. Enthusiasm in participation is both the key to maturity, and then also the evidence of maturity. As such it both requires labour, and produces joy.

Paul uses the last four verses of ch. 2 to bring the Thessalonians up to date on his affection for them since the last time they saw each other, and he speaks in no generalities – he is very particularly *enthusiastic about his participation* with the believers! This enthusiasm in participation springs from how he thought about the opposite of participation – namely, *absence*. These verses are a well presented theology on church absence. Nowhere in all of Scripture do you find as clear a Christian perspective on staying away from the gathering of the saints as you do here!

Paul gives us, in the form of his own experienced, a thorough explanation of a Christian's theology of absence. Let me give you his main points in doctrine form, then we will follow his own experience of it. Absence from other believers, 1st, is harmful, 2nd, makes the heart fonder, 3rd, demands a plan of action, 4th, overcomes hindrances, and 5th, anticipates glory and joy.

That is the doctrinal points of a Christian Theology of Absence from other believers. But, as God graciously does in so much of Scripture, this theology is presented to us in the actual experiences of His people. This is not a theoretical or intellectual study for pastors, theologians, and Bible professors. This is the experience of a mature Christian who at the end of this all prays that we can be like this too.

The first truth of a Christian's experience of being absent from being with believers, is that absence ...

IS HURTFUL

Absence hurts a mature believer. Living in this world with only a handful of opportunities each week to be with believers is not ideal. So if you can't even participate in the handful of opportunities to meet with the saints, it hurts. Absence from believers is hurtful, even if only for a short time.

Just look at the word Paul used to describe his experience of temporary absence from the saints. He begins v. 17 with “*we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time*”. Paul was a mature Christian because he understood that the church is not a pad of sticky notes easily separated and attached elsewhere. Rather, the church it is a tightly bound book—to be separated, even for a short while, results in a tear. Christians are designed to be together all the time—mature Christians understand that and is part of the reason for their maturity! The first church in Acts grew so quickly into a host of missionaries reaching the world, in part, they had *daily* opportunity to be with the saints!

Your social skills don't improve when you withdraw from society. Your academics don't improve when you only study sporadically. Your children don't learn obedience when you are rarely at home. Your relationship with your boss does not improve when you show up to work late and without any enthusiasm. Likewise, Christians don't mature *spiritually* when they separate themselves from one another.

The frequency, timeliness, and enthusiasm regarding church, Home-groups, prayer meetings, and outreach ministries is a good first test to evaluate your Christian maturity. It is not the *only* test, *nor* does faithful and wholehearted attendance validate your maturity, but if even the short absences from church seem natural to you, you are thinking as *immature* Christians do, and you need to be a better imitator of those who are more mature. Whether or not you realise it, absence hurts. It hurts when a part of the body is removed; the removed part might not feel the pain, but the body always does. Absence discourages; it fall short; it hardens—it hurts!

That is the first truth of a mature Christian's experience of absence.

The second truth of a Christian's experience in absence from believers, is that absence ...

MAKES THE HEART FONDER

Absence hurts like tearing a piece off, but at the same time, it does make us realise what we had when everything was together. Those of you who are faithful and committed to church have the same experience, don't you?! You go away for your annual holiday, or go visit family abroad, and as much as you enjoy your time away, you really start missing the Christians back home.

But not everyone experiences it that way. The immaturity in Christianity today experiences absence very differently. Absence is never even reflected upon! Since the world did not stop turning when church began without you, and since your salvation application was not revoked the second time you were absent, and since a month of absence didn't make you fall into some infamous sin, immaturity among Christians thrives. Since you were not present, you don't know what you missed, and so you think you missed nothing. Out of sight truly becomes out of mind—O, you might remember some individuals even if absent for a month, but the church is forgotten. Mature Christians are not like that.

Paul continues in v. 17 that even though they were torn away from the church, they did not forget them. “Out of sight,” for Paul, was never “out of mind.” Since believers are spiritual family – brothers and sisters, absence must make the heart grow fonder. Look again at v. 17; He calls the Thessalonian Christians “brothers.”, and then adds that their physical *absence* was real, but their *heart* never left. “we were torn away from you, brothers, ... in person, not in heart.”

What you experience during your absence from other believers will tell you what you might not be willing to admit otherwise—you might not be as mature as you think, and you might need to correct some hurtful habits. Alternatively, if, while absent from church for whatever reason, you long to be with the believers, and you wonder what songs they sang today to lift their thoughts to God, what prayers were prayed for the work of God through your church, what text was preached, what application was made, what conversations were encouraging and

motivating, who was sitting on your seat or who would have stood behind you in the coffee queue, *then* you are experiencing in absence what all mature believers experience when absent. Because absence among those who love one another, makes the heart grow fonder.

And this is now where it gains momentum. One of the wonderful grace of the Lord given to us, is that when our heart is changed, all other changes comes so much easier. The mature experience absence as something hurtful. The mature therefore find their heart growing all the fonder of the saints when not with them. And with a heart swelling with fondness, actions always follow.

The third truth of a Christian's experience of being absent from being with believers, is that absence ...

DEMANDS A PLAN OF ACTION

READ v. 17 "... we endeavored ...". Absence among the mature always prioritise its opposite. By the way, this is a practical way to grow in all areas – if you are falling short in one area, prioritise its opposite. For eg. if you missed date-night with your wife, *prioritise* the next date night. If you were angry with someone, *prioritise* gentleness for next time. Paul prioritised “enthusiastic in-person participation” when absent. Paul’s plan of attack was his itinerary—his schedule! Pulling his monthly planner closer, he scribbled “THESSALONICA” across the pages a few weeks from then—after all, he didn’t have a car and it would take a while to get back to them. As though planning for a great event, Paul eagerly made specific plans to get to the believers.

His description “*we endeavoured the more eagerly and with great desire*” describes serious rescheduling and enthusiastic implementation of a new set of plans. Mature believers are like that. They plan very carefully to be with other believers and they execute that plan with eager zeal.

One mature Christian man who taught me much, both in and out of seminary classes, is a man who participated enthusiastically in the life of his church. He coined a little phrase that governed his plans about attending church. “Sunday

morning begins Saturday night” was his family’s motto. He endeavoured eagerly to be at church on Sunday, which meant he rescheduled his Saturday nights. He planned every day of the week so Saturday night would be open, and then Saturday night he planned ahead to be ready for church the next day. To give you some practical illustrations of this: Throughout the week he declined all Saturday night, Sunday morning and Sunday evening invitations. The only Saturday night and Sunday invitations that were honoured were those that fit between noon and 4pm. Then, on Saturday night, the shirts were ironed, the kids’ clothes were laid out, Bibles, pens and notebooks were put next to the car-keys so that Sunday morning could be more relaxed and less frantic than is normally the case.

“Sunday morning begins Saturday night”. Mature Christians coin mottos like that—adjust it for your own situation. In our home, having a 3pm service, we stop life on Sundays at noon—12 o’clock. Then we eat, bath the kids, get dressed, and leave in time to be early for music practise. You see, my family is not at church every Sunday because I preach. We are here at 2pm, because that is when one person in our family starts her Church Service service to the saints.

Your weekly scheduling decisions and commitments, especially as they affect your fellowship with the saints, reflects spiritual maturity. Absence from one another demands a plan of action.

But, you might say, so many things pop up each week that also demand attention. Things don’t always go as planned. Schedules need to be flexible. Paul shares his own experience of interruptions in the plan in READ v. 18.

The fourth truth of a Chrisian's experience of being absent from being with believers, is that absence ...

OVERCOMES HINDRANCES

Paul would endure in his plan to be with the saints and would never give up, not even if the Devil got involved! “*Again, and again,*” Paul writes, reverting to the first person, “I wanted to come to you.” “We made plans, and then something happened. We made new plans, and they got thwarted too.” What the hindrance of Satan was we do not know, presumable Paul and the Thessalonians knew what

he was referring to, nonetheless, Paul did not even let demonic influences damper his eager actions. Knowing that being absent from believers is hurtful for both the individual and the church, he endured in his efforts to overcome any hindrances in getting to the Thessalonians. If Paul was absent, you could be sure that it was not due to any indifference on his part. He never had a common excuse; instead he had a handful of reasons, but none of them would damper his zeal to be with the saints. If plan A doesn't work, invent plan B. If there is still a hindrance, overcome it. If you can't this time, then plan well ahead for next time.

There are really only three kinds of church attenders, and you can tell which you are by asking everyone else. There are those who, when they arrive at church, produce a gasp of pleasant surprise from everyone else because they are hardly ever present. Then there are those who, when they are NOT present, produce a serious concern from everyone else because they are ALWAYS present. And then there are those who, whether they are present or absent produce no real response from anyone, because they take attendance no more seriously than they take reasons not to attend. Ask others which one you are!

I had a very privileged experience growing up in a home where church was non-negotiable—you always went—to pretty much everything. Excuses for NOT being at church, fell into the restricted category containing things like “contagious diseases” and “motor accidents.” I'm not joking! I only missed church as a child when I had a communicable disease like chicken-pox and when we were in a car-accident on the way to church. My spiritual gratefulness for that explodes when reading verses like these of Paul! That is a heritage I'd like to hand down to my sons—he must comprehend that our family will make more effort to be at church than we will for sport, or holiday, or any other event—therefore I must imitate the example of Paul in this.

Being in church does not necessarily prove your spiritual maturity, but being absent generally does say something about your spiritual *immaturity*.

Mature Christians are enthusiastic in their participation with each other. Even when Satan made it truly impossible for Paul, we find in ch 3:2 that Paul sent a

friend to keep him up to date about what he missed while absent. Enthusiastic participation will find a way to overcome every hindrance. The world knows how to overcome hindrances for their beer, sport, and holidays; Christians know how to overcome hindrance for one another.

Yes, by now you guessed it – this is the “come to church” sermon that we all need to hear once in a while. And such a sermon always stings a little. So, you resolve to get your act together, step up your personal and family commitments, ... but ... three weeks later you are back in the same old unhealthy habit. A trial hits, and against all sound thinking, you skip church for a Sunday thinking somehow the trial will be easier to bear without one another. Then, you feel bad for missing a Sunday, so you skip another one so you don’t have to explain yourself to the others as though we are God. Or, you successfully and politely decline every invitation that falls on a Sunday, but then the pressure of your other spiritually immature friends mounts, and you figure, one skip can’t be that bad, so you say “Yes” to the invitation; effectively saying “No” to church. Our flesh is weak, and that is why our Spirit must be strong.

What kept Paul’s spirit so strong? How could Paul always beat his flesh into submission, instead of his flesh drawing his heart away from Christ? In vv. 19-20 Paul renews your mind with His reason/motivation for Enthusiastic Participation. It is really a little tangent of happiness during his trial of not being with the saints.

The fifth truth of a Christian's experience of being absent from being with believers, is that absence ...

ANTICIPATES JOY

Mature believers long for true joy. They understand that more joy is had in enthusiastic participation with other Christians than anything else. So, when absent from other Christians, they use the joy they missed out on, to fuel an eager anticipation for that joy the next time.

READ 2:19-20. Twice he refers to the believers as his “joy.” In v. 19 he refers to them as his “hope” “joy” and “crown of boasting”—all three describing a *future* when-Jesus-returns motivation for being with the believers now. In v. 20, he explicitly uses a present tense verb to affirm that they are already his “glory” and “joy”—that is the *present* motivation for being with the believers ASAP.

As a mature Christian, Paul’s greatest earthly joy was found in the fellowship of believers; it is with believers that he was at his happiest.

It is no secret that you always do what you desire most—you always do what you perceive will offer the greatest JOY and satisfaction. Most of life's decisions come down to a decision between competing JOYS. Sometimes you give up a temporary pleasure for a future goal because you believe that the long-term joy outperforms the immediate joy of the alternative. As far as food is concerned, we understand that concept. A chocolate *now* is nice, but a lower weight a year later is *nicer*, so we begrudgingly decline the chocolate because of a future joy.

But, for mature Christians, the fellowship of believers is both the chocolate now and the healthier body later. Our official beliefs might claim that the future heavenly non-stop fellowship of believers is where the greatest joy will be found. But the more we mature in the faith, the more we realise that it is the weekly fellowship of believers that not only assures us of *future* joy, but also provides the greatest joy for the *present*.

Charles Spurgeon, in 1891 said this in a sermon to his congregation: “*Give yourself to the Church*” he said, “*it is the dearest place on earth to us.*” And we can add with Paul, “it will be the dearest place in heaven to us as well³

Living as a Christian in this world is not often very joyful. Sadly, we still so often seek joy in this world. I'll be happiest if I take my kids to the beach. I'll be happiest if I sleep in. I'll be happiest if I chill at home before another busy week. I'll be happiest if I go away every weekend. I'll be happiest if my visitors don't go to church either.

We do this all not realising that it doesn't bring joy. God, the very architect of joy has given us fellowship to make us joyful. The fellowship of the saints who get

together to be happy, because the world is going to make them so unhappy for the rest of the week. The fellowship with one another where we come to worship God, serve one another, pray, sing, learn, give, encourage, be encouraged. It is the joy! that gets crammed into our souls every Sunday, that becomes the grace that gets us through 6 more days of earthly existence. Just like a solitary coal loses its fire in no time at all, so solitary Christians lose all their joy in a matter of days. Your church is not just another appointment for the week—it is your source of joy! In v. 17, Paul reminds us that these are our brothers and sisters in a spiritual family. Blood might be thicker than water, but spirit is stronger still.

The five words in these verses, describing the fellowship of believers among one another, are five of the most esteemed things in this world!

The first word is "*Hope*". Hope is eager anticipation of something wonderful that motivates and inspires us. Fellowship with the saints is that inspiration and motivation we need to keep plodding throughout the week so we can make it to Sunday, and to keep plodding month after month, year after year, so we can make it to the coming of the Lord Jesus.

The second word is "joy." Your happiness in this life! As you experience more of this world, it becomes less and less funny and enjoyable; other Christians make up the difference. When trials hit, and hit hard, then only other believers will be able to bring that deep, trusting, joy back into your life. The prophet Habakkuk wrote a song to inspire his fellow believers with joy during trials. Listen to a few lines from this song:

Habakkuk 3:17-18

Though the fig tree should not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,

yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

The third word is an entire phrase: The “crown of boasting”. That is the victor's proof that he has good reason to be really happy! You've seen the smiles on the Olympic gold winners' faces when that medal is hung around their neck! Church is the spiritual gold medal of Christianity!

The fourth word is "glory", very similar to this "crown of boasting".

The fifth word is again "joy", as though Paul wanted to be the word that lingers when you finish reading this paragraph.

Fellow Christians here today, you are my hope, my joy, my gold medal of boasting, my glory, and again, my joy.

But it is the somewhat rhetorical questions in the middle of these two verses that is the real visual element. READ vv. 19-20. When Jesus comes to festch us all, Paul is going to start a glorified boasting movement. If facebook, and twitter, and whatsapp, and billboards are not annihilated at the second coming, Paul would use it all to start a glorified boasting movement. He is going to be loud, and clear, and excited, and overtly boastful, but the hashtag that goes with it all is going to be #church.

He tells the Thessalonians that when Jesus comes back, he is going to boast about them. We can well imagine some of his boasts by looking at out own church. The church is the most joy-filled place on earth—it is the one place where you can sing even though you are down, where you can pray even when all is well, where you can learn even if you already learned so much, where you can love even if you don't know everyone, where you can serve just because you love Christ, where you can escape the world for a couple hours, where you can refresh your spirit, where you can renew your resolve, where you can get a taste of heavenly pleasures. As Spurgeon boasted: "The church is the dearest place on earth."

Enthusiastic participation at church, is the first joyful labour of every mature Christian. There are five more Joyful Labours of a Mature Christian. Since Paul spent four verses on this one, and since the application to us is very inspiring and profitable, I thought it would be worthy of its own sermon. Next week we will look at the next few commitments that bring, to the spiritually mature, great joy.

Amen.