

One of the most underrated challenges in life is just growing up. Growing old is inevitable. Growing up is optional. Peter Pan didn't want to grow up. The Peter Pan Syndrome is a term used to describe little boys in adult male bodies whose bodies have matured but their minds have not. It's easy to love children who act like children. It's a lot harder to love someone who acts like a child in the body of a grownup. Sometimes whole churches act like children.

The apostle Paul wrote the church in Corinth and challenged their childish behavior. He said that when he was a child, he "spoke like a child, thought like a child, reasoned like a child. But when I became a man, I gave up childish ways." What are these "childish ways?"

A poor work ethic.

A low tolerance for pain and discomfort.

A low level of motivation and persistence.

A failure to take responsibility for one's actions.

A lack of vision for the future resulting in the absence of long-term goals.

Immature churches are full of people with high expectations of others without reciprocating.

A grown man acting like a child is a sad sight. So is a childish church. So how do we grow up? How do we become mature in our faith? The foundation of a mature church is found in the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians. In chapter one, Paul, the Pastor of Pediatrics praised these young believers for their faith, hope and love. He says elsewhere, the greatest of these is love. So today, I want to take a close look at Paul's instructions in chapter 2 and identify the underlying growth indicators in a church that is growing in their love for one another.

**I. Pure motives...**vv. 1-6. Notice how Paul describes his teaching. He says, "Our message was bold (2:1-2) because our motives were pure (2:3-6)." When our motives are impure our love gets polluted. Love, by definition, does what is in the best interests of others. Immaturity is marked by our tendency to act loving in a way that ultimately benefits us. We are constantly tempted to show love for the wrong reasons. And what are these reasons?

A few weeks ago, we spent time looking into the temptations of Christ. We called them life drifts. Our relationships as well as our ministries can drift off the rails when we pursue our own selfish agenda in three areas - Appetite, ambition, and approval. All three of these temptations are present in verses 4-6. Approval (v. 4). Appetite (v. 5). Ambition (v. 6).

Impure motives cannot produce pure love. To overcome the duplicity in our hearts we have to reverse the direction of our affection by beginning with the pure love of Christ. We have to reverse the flow like the city fathers of Chicago reversed the flow of the Chicago River back in 1900. The River used to flow into Lake Michigan depositing all the junk and pollution it accumulated as it passed through the city. It now flows out of the lake rather than into the lake. It is the only river in the entire Great Lakes system that receives its water from the lake. Because the lake is now its source, the river is clean and strong and not dependent on unreliable sources like rainfall, snow melt and underground springs. Impure motives cannot produce pure love any more than a polluted river can produce a pure lake. When our motives are impure, we use people to gratify ourselves rather than loving people to glorify God. There is a second growth indicator present in churches that are growing in love.

**II. Gentle firmness.** To drive home his point about how love grows, Paul resorts to two classic, universally accepted examples of love - a mother and a father. Though both love their children passionately, moms and dads parent differently providing two indispensable ingredients to maturity - truth and love. Paul told the Ephesian believers, "We are to no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." Eph. 4:14-16. Moms are more closely identified with love and dads with truth.

**Love with selfless devotion like a nursing mother...vv. 7-10.** It's hard to think of a more beautiful picture of love than that of a nursing mother. In v. 8 Paul says we not only gave you the gospel "but also our own selves." That's what a nursing mother does. She gives her child a transfusion every few hours - a life transfusion. The physical benefits of breast milk extend beyond basic nutrition. Breast milk not only contains all the vitamins and nutrients a baby needs in the first six months of life, but it is packed with disease-fighting substances that can protect a baby from illness. Not only that but in that feeding process there is an incredible bonding that takes place that leads to better emotional development and stability in life. As a child gazes into her mother's eyes, she comes to understand that she is loved and protected and mom is there to provide for her needs as she adjusts to this new world.

But too much mothering leads to arrested development resulting in a failure to launch. This phenomenon is called "helicopter parenting." A helicopter parent hovers over a child's life overcontrolling, overprotecting, and overperfecting. Breast feeding a child is great but doing their homework for them is a bit much. Insuring their safety is fine but insuring that they will make the cheerleading squad is sick. Cutting your three-year old's food isn't helicopter parenting. Cutting your thirteen-year old's food is.

When it comes to "speaking the truth in love" a mother may tend to favor love over truth. But love without truth is merely enabling behavior. Shielding your child from anything that might be uncomfortable, may wind up wounding them in the process, sometimes permanently not to mention what it does to the parent or the pastor who thinks their job is to make sure those they are responsible are happy all the time. I remember hearing a story about a young boy who discovered the cocoon of a moth as the moth was trying to emerge. He felt bad for the moth so he gently cut away the cocoon. The moth plopped out onto the table a motionless blob. It would never fly because what the boy did not understand was that the struggle to emerge from that cocoon was designed by God to strengthen the wings of the moth so that it could fly.

In an unhealthy church there is a lot of mothering that goes on. People are protected from the consequences of their actions in the name of mercy and grace. It is perfectly natural for a mom to want to protect her child from pain. But overprotection is unloving.

**Love with the encouraging presence of a faithful father...vv. 11-16.** God's design is for a two-parent family in which a child can grow up by experiencing truth and love. Moms and dads parent their children differently. Parenting experts say that by eight weeks of age, infants can tell

the difference between their mother's and father's interaction with them. For example, fathers play with their children differently. They tickle, wrestle, throw their kids in the air or on the bed. They chase their kids and play scary monsters with them. And what does mom say, "Honey, don't be so rough." In a forty-year study published by Harvard University Press, fathering expert John Snarey explains that children who roughhouse with their fathers learn that biting, kicking and other forms of physical violence are not acceptable. They learn self-control by being told when "enough is enough" and when to settle down. They also learn a healthy balance between timidity and aggression.

Fathers build confidence in their kids. Go to any playground and listen to the parents. Who is more likely to be telling their kids to swing higher or climb higher or ride their bike just a little faster, throw the ball a little harder? Who is encouraging kids to be careful? Mothers tend to protect and dads tend to push their kids to the limits. Just as moms can be overprotective, fathers can be overly demanding. In an unhealthy church, people can be led to feel like they can never measure up. Some fathers are too demanding of their kids. They set the bar so high that the child loses heart and just gives up.

A godly father embodies sincere devotion to Jesus and to His mission on earth. "We exhorted (encouraged) each one of you and encouraged (urged - cheer on) 5:14 (Jn. 11:19) you and charged (insisted) you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory." v. 12.

Let me just say a word to single moms. There is no harder job on the planet. You have to be mom AND dad. Not to mention you have to work to provide for your family. I want you to remember that God is a father with a mother's heart. The God who is always described as male in scripture also reflects the qualities of a female. I tell you that because when you struggle to be both mom and dad, turn to God who has within His nature the qualities of both. There is one more underlying growth indicator in a healthy maturing church.

**III. Anticipation of reward vv. 17-20.** The reward Paul is looking forward to is somewhat unexpected. When we think of our eternal reward we tend to think of those things that will benefit us. But love, by definition, is willing the best for someone else. So Paul says I can't wait until Jesus returns so I can show you off. "Look, Lord, look at what these men and women have become. And I got to be part of it." There is no greater joy than to see your children following the path that you have patiently and painstakingly laid out for them. John said, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth." 3 Jn. 4. There is also no greater pain than to see your children taking a path that is completely opposed to everything you stand for.

Paul was a glory hog. But he didn't seek glory for himself. "Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ." 2:6. Instead, he labored among the churches not so he could get glory but so that he could give it. He wanted to be able to stand before Jesus when He returns and say, "Here is my glory, that I have been used to bring these people closer to their Savior. Now, I give all this glory to you."

Paul could have just laid down the law to the Thessalonians without getting his hands dirty by living among them. He could have just delivered a list of laws and regulations. But rules without

a relationship is like voice without touch. Max Depree's granddaughter was born perilously premature and weighed only one pound, seven ounces. De Pree could cover her entire body with one hand. Though her chances of surviving were a mere 5 to 10 percent, her mother bravely named her Zoe, the Greek word for life. The nurse told Max that his job was to speak tenderly to his granddaughter, stroking her gently with one finger, so that she could learn to connect his voice with his touch. That's our calling - connecting voice and touch, truth and love, with pure motives and the expectation of a reward.

We have been called to love one another. We have not been called to be loved. As a dad, I used to say to my kids, "When this is over, I hope you like me but that is not my primary objective. It is to train you. And training is painful. But I love you too much to shield you from the painful part of growing up." I feel the same way about this church. I want to say to the Lord, "I gave myself to the task of building up the body of Christ." That's your calling too. So, think about those you have been assigned to love. Ask God to purify your heart so that your actions stem from proper motives. Then ask God to show you how to balance love and truth. Finally, don't delay. Love like there's no tomorrow. Because you never know, there might not be.