



MOMENTS TO PONDER
UNVEILING JOY:
EXPLORING THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

Episode 86: Maturing Faith (Philippians 1:12-19)

Hi Friends! Welcome to Moments to Ponder. This is a podcast designed to help you spend a few moments in God's Word wherever you are and take away something to ponder.

We live in a loud, busy world that can make it hard to find the time to get into God's word and I'm grateful for these moments we have to ponder the book of Philippians in the series that I've titled, Unveiling Joy. I'm Betsy Marvin and this is episode 86.

(music fades)

I serve in the area of discipleship at my church, and lately my team and I have been discussing what a mature Christian looks like – as in behavior, attitude, influence. Not that we, in any way, think we have arrived, but as we are called to equip the church, we want to know – what does the 'end goal' look like? We ask because we want to help set the conditions for that type of growth to happen – not only for those in our church but for us as well.

So, let me ask you, what do you think are the characteristics of a mature follower of Jesus? (pause)

Do you want to reflect them in your life?

Here's why I ask - In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul said, *"I close my letter with these last words: Be joyful. Grow to maturity. Encourage each other. Live in harmony and peace. Then the God of love and peace will be with you."* 2 Corinthians 13:11 John wrote his letter *"to those who are mature in their faith"* which is in 1 John.

This gives us a bit of an idea of how maturity in faith is lived: encouraging others, living in harmony with others, being joyful, growing, filled with the love and peace of God.

Yet, we also know it can't be some type of exam we can ace, it's way of life, belief, and faith.

Our discussions have led us toward this definition – a mature believer is someone that has learned where their true faith and strength come from and can stand faithful in the face of hardship because of their spiritual foundation in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit within them. In short, someone that lives completely for Jesus and in Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, no matter what.

There is more to that conversation, but today's passage has me thinking about this because I am reminded of how far Paul's faith has come since the early days of his ministry. We begin in verse 12 of chapter 1:

And I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News. Phil. 1:12

Paul's words here lead me to think that the Philippians have shared their concerns about all that had happened to Paul because he starts here with, "I want you to know..."

So, what happened? From the account in Acts, we discover that Paul had been beaten, left in prison for years, shipwrecked, stuck on an island for months, and was again back to prison...yet he is saying that in all of that he sees God at work. These, to me, are words of someone that has come to a maturity of faith. Rather than focus in on the hardship, he sees the wonder of the spread of the gospel. It is completely not about him, but about Jesus.

Remember, when Paul was in Philippi, he and Silas were miraculously released from prison and all charges were dropped against them. The Philippians have to have been wondering, why wasn't God doing something miraculous now?

They don't see it, but Paul, from his vantage point, is able to see the bigger picture and all that has happened to spread the gospel. The prison guard's entire family was baptized, no lives were lost in the shipwreck, and entire island now had the

gospel, and even under arrest he is doing God's work. He hadn't let his circumstances deter him from God's work, in fact, he had taken advantage of every opportunity given.

He goes on to say in verse 13-14, *For everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ. And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and boldly speak God's message without fear.*

Paul wasn't just sitting around moping and feeling sorry for himself – he continued to do the work God had placed before him – sharing the Good News with gentiles. From the palace guard to the believers in the area, he is telling of Jesus. He is living in prison, a less than the ideal place, but Paul is fruitful even there. In fact, we know that he was able to write many letters while in prison, this letter to the Philippians as well as one to the Ephesians and the Colossians.

Have you ever noticed that when we see the courage of others, we start to feel a bit more courageous too? Or, when we see how God provides in someone else's life, we begin to believe that he can provide for us too? This is what's happening for those around Paul.

They saw his attitude of joy in spite of his situation, they saw that God took care of Paul in his circumstance, and they saw that God was still using him even while in prison. This encouraged and emboldened their faith.

Oftentimes, the faith of others is the catalyst we need when we are facing something hard, it's why testimonies are so important. Our stories help others see Jesus, and Paul's story was reaching many including the Roman guards holding him.

Ponder this for a moment: How do you see God in your story when you look back on it?

(music)

Does someone need to hear your story to be encouraged in their faith?

(music)

In the next verses, Paul addresses something that I think hits close to our current culture...going back to verse 14 and going forward we read:

And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and boldly speak God's message without fear. ¹⁵ It's true that some are preaching out of jealousy and rivalry. But others preach about Christ with pure motives. ¹⁶ They preach because they love me, for they know I have been appointed to defend the Good News. ¹⁷ Those others do not have pure motives as they preach about Christ. They preach with selfish ambition, not sincerely, intending to make my chains more painful to me. ¹⁸ But that doesn't matter. Whether their motives are false or genuine, the message about Christ is being preached either way, so I rejoice. And I will continue to rejoice. ¹⁹ For I know that as you pray for me and the Spirit of Jesus Christ helps me, this will lead to my deliverance.

The Philippians must have expressed concern about those that were preaching with less than pure motives, preaching out of jealousy or selfish ambition. Paul knew that some were preaching to “surpass” him and build something larger, become more known. In fact, he knows that some are glad he's in prison because they have an edge over him.

But, as he shares with the Philippian church, he also knows this isn't about him, not his name, not his fame – it's about bringing people to Jesus...and if that is happening in spite of the selfishness of the preacher – it is still happening and he can celebrate that. Again, a maturity he would not have shown in his younger years.

I think this is good for us to process...a bad pastor doesn't make the work of Christ bad...today we hear of this pastor or that leader in the church falling to sin and we tend to lump the whole of their church with them and that diminishes the fact that Christ was still able to work. The sin of the leader is not the sin of the whole.

Church-competition...I find it so sad that this is a thing and, if I'm honest, I'm not surprised that it's been around since before Paul. Humans enjoy competition, its football season as I record this and I see jerseys and sweatshirts everywhere in support of a favorite team. It's fun. It's basically harmless...until it's not. Until the line is cross into doing whatever it takes to win. We want to be faster, more successful, wealthier. We love it in sports, in business, and, many times, in the church.

If you are a pastor or church leader you know what this can look like - I have “x” number on Sundays, my church gives X to the poor, my church is seen in X places around the word, I am asked to speak all over , I have platform, a book - it’s a thing that can lead a righteous person down a ugly road toward the selfish ambitions that Paul is speaking of here. Did you notice, all the “my” and “I” statements? I learned early in ministry that these words can be the beginning of the slippery slope. When I began to focus on the language of “our” ministry and “our mission”, it helped me to remember that it’s God’s ministry through us – not mine. There is deep blessing when the work of God is shared with others – and Paul knew this.

He did know that some pastors were doing great things, and he recognized them, He is able to see past the less the great ones and rejoice that Jesus is being shared. Again, his joy runs deep.

Oh that we could do this. That we could look past the failings and disagreements and rejoice that God’s work is happening in spite of the differences and sin. If we could, I wonder if we would discover a deeper joy like Paul’s. This kind of thinking takes growth, time, and patience as we discover more about forgiveness and grace.

If you were to self-evaluate where you are in your spiritual journey, where would you say you are?

A newbie, just learning what this Christianity thing is all about?

A learner, on the road but more to discover.

A builder, you have a foundation and are building on it with your thoughts and actions.

A Integrator, seeking to integrate Christ into every aspect of your life.

A mature follower, solid, fully invested, and steady in who you know you are in Christ.

Although I do think we can become mature in our faith, I don’t think there is ever an arrival, meaning, I’m not sure anyone should ever feel like they have arrived in their faith journey. God is infinite and there is always more to learn, experience, or enjoy with Him.

Yet, no matter where you might place yourself, God sees you as his child, one whom he delights in and dwells. He doesn’t grade our faith, but he does encourage us to grow and discover more of him, to see our lives become Christ-centered, to see us experience his deep joy.

Dear One, may the faith of Paul encourage your heart today as it did those he walked with all those years ago. May you see how God is at work despite the circumstances around you. And, may you see past those who would distract you with their behavior and look to Jesus, experience his deep joy in You – his delightful one – as you walk in this day with Him.

I close with the words of Paul - *Be joyful. Grow to maturity. Encourage each other. Live in harmony and peace. Then the God of love and peace will be with you."*

You are loved.

Amen.