

Women's Bible Study – Winter/Spring 2009
In Christ Alone

April 15, 2009

Christ Equips Us To Minister to Others

1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

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My husband Rich and I both have a lot of missionaries in our families. When we were growing up, we wrote letters on those old blue airforms almost as much as we wrote on regular stationery. Between our two families we had relatives in Africa, South America, Korea, the Philippines, and India. I also enjoyed reading biographies of missionaries—Hudson Taylor, Gladys Aylward, Adoniram Judson, Jim Elliot, Nate Saint. And my favorite part of VBS was when Mrs. Price would—amazingly—keep about 75 little kids totally engrossed all by herself in what we called “the missionary story.” Every day she’d stop at the most exciting part, and we’d all let out our breath audibly, eager to come back the next day to find out what would happen.

Paul’s life is like Mrs. Price’s missionary stories, and 1 Thessalonians is sort of like one of those old blue airforms. It’s a letter from Paul to one of his mission churches, and it reveals a lot about his ministry. On one of Paul’s journeys he went to this city, Thessalonica, and did what he usually did. I’m going to read Luke’s account of this encounter in Acts 17. If you have your Bibles, you can turn there. (And when we go to Thessalonians, you’ll want to keep a bookmark in Acts, because we’ll be going back.) “Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.’ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”

So Paul goes to this metropolitan area, and we see here (and we saw last week in 1 Thessalonians 1) that when Paul spoke, the gospel came to people there “not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1:5). And what was the result? A church was born, and lives were changed. Chapter 1 said the people “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1:9).

This is what happens to people who believe the gospel. This is what missionaries do—back in Paul’s day, back in my grandparents’ day, and today. This happens cross culturally all over the world and this happens when we evangelize in Rochester, Minnesota.

Let's turn to our text today now. We're in I Thessalonians 2:1-16. We'll read the whole passage. "For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But God's wrath has come upon them at last!"

I want to organize our thoughts today under three broad headings. **First—what authentic gospel ministry is not; second—what authentic gospel ministry is like; and finally, the results of authentic gospel ministry.**

I'm struck by how many negatives Paul uses in this passage. He takes pains to explain what they didn't do and what they weren't like in this first paragraph, verses 1-8. He does this because Paul had apparently been accused of all kinds of bad things. Religion then, as it is now, was the residence of many a huckster and charlatan. Paul needed to distinguish himself from those kinds of people.

Let's look at what authentic gospel ministry is not. First, **it does not "spring from error"** (v. 3). It is the truth. Thessalonica was home to many Jews but also home to many pagans. Paul lived in a time that was probably as religiously pluralistic as our own. And he does not hesitate to emphasize the absolute truth claims that are at the core of Christianity. (There is only one God; salvation is found only in Jesus. Acts 4:12) Our faith

is not “true for you” or “true for me.” It is not relativistic. It is *the* truth. Authentic gospel ministry does not spring from error.

It is also not “impure” (v. 3). The pagan cults in the ancient world often involved sexual exploitation and perversion, and Paul wanted to distance himself from any of those associations. And that kind of impurity did not die with antiquity. I was reading a biography of Amy Carmichael, missionary to India in the early 1900s, and I was sickened at what was done to little girls in the name of religion. In verse 10 Paul stresses that he was “holy, righteous, and blameless” in his conduct toward them. Authentic gospel ministry has no trace of impurity.

Next, it is not ever an “attempt to deceive” (v. 3). There is no trickery, not even insincerity. What you see is what you get. Paul was the real deal, and he invites anyone to test this because God is the one who tests him, which brings us to the next point.

It is not *from* man, and it’s not to *please* man. Verse 4 says “we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.” The source of Paul’s message and ours is supernatural, not human. And the goal is not to please people, but to please God. Why? Because God is the one who “tests our hearts.” He knows our motives, all our secret thoughts and attitudes behind our actions. When we are controlled by a desire to please people, we’ll be tempted to flatter them, to tell them what they want to hear, but Paul says he “never came with words of flattery.” The starting point of the gospel—that our main problem is that we are alienated from God because of our inherent sinfulness—is not a flattering proposition. So while we should strive to be winsome, the truth about ourselves before Christ is anything but flattering. Telling people what they want to hear is not always good counsel. The speaker at the marriage retreat this year, longtime pastor and author George Kenworthy, expressed frustration with many so-called Christian marriage counselors who seem to tell people only what they want to hear instead of telling them what the Bible says is true about marriage. We need to be like Paul in the way that we speak to others—filled with the truth of Scripture, not man’s wisdom.

Finally, authentic gospel ministry is **not motivated by money**. Paul says he could have made demands, but he didn’t. He could have asked for pay. Instead verse 9 says, “We worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.” Paul worked as a tentmaker to earn money to support himself. He didn’t want these new Christians to think that grace could be earned or that the gospel was going to come with a bill.

Greed in the church has been a potential problem from Paul’s day until now. The sale of indulgences was one of the things that sparked the Protestant Reformation. Today, you can hardly turn on the TV without seeing some “health and wealth gospel” preacher asking for money and tying the donor’s gift to his faith, as if we can buy God’s favor with our cash. Paul knew his message would be authenticated by proving that he trusted God to supply his needs and that Jesus, not money, is what satisfies.

We have the same opportunity. Oh, the power we have to display Christ as all-satisfying to the world when we keep our lives free from the love of money! No one will believe me when I say Jesus is everything to me if I spend most of my time and mental energy striving to get more money so I can buy more stuff or do more fun things. Paul bent over backwards to show he was not motivated by greed.

A key to recognize here is that we need to distinguish ourselves from *inauthentic* ministry NOT just by what we say, but by what we do. And this is usually accomplished over time, not in 2 minutes. Paul uses the phrase, “as you know” in verse 5 and “you remember” in verse 9 and “You are witnesses” in verse 10. How did they know these things about Paul’s ministry? Because he had told them? No. Because he had lived his life before them. They didn’t just hear it. They saw it over time.

After Paul defends himself and his ministry by emphasizing what he did not do, he uses two powerful metaphors to explain **what he did do**. First he says he **was like a nursing mother** taking care of her own children. There is something uniquely powerful about a mother’s care for her own children. Paul knows that a babysitter just doesn’t have the same feelings that the mother has, doesn’t he? Our first child was born in Asia. I vividly remember leaving him in the church nursery there for the first time. He was about 6 weeks old, and it was hard for me to leave him in someone else’s care, if only for an hour or two during the church service. You can imagine my horror when I went to pick him up and the nursery worker (who had recently had her fourth child) said, “He got a little fussy, so I nursed him for you.” I was speechless. It was a good thing my husband was not there, because when I told him about it on the bus ride home, he was NOT so speechless!

But Paul was not some wet nurse, not a surrogate. He felt towards this new little fellowship of believers as a mother feels for her own children. He highlights three aspects of this special relationship. He says he was “**gentle, affectionately desirous, and ready to share himself**” with them.

First he was **gentle**. James describes the wisdom from above as being “gentle” (3:17), and Paul gives gentleness as a requirement for the Lord’s servants (II Tim 2:25). And as we’ll see later, the opposite of gentleness is not boldness. Paul was bold and gentle. Rather, the opposite of gentleness is harshness or impatience.

Next he was **affectionately desirous**. Elsewhere in this letter, Paul speaks of the longing he has to see them face to face. He tells them they are his “glory and joy.” He says he sought to find out how they were doing because “he could bear it no longer,” and he says he “prays earnestly night and day” for them. (2:17, 20; 3:5, 10). Isn’t that a great picture of motherhood? And isn’t that a great picture of what the gospel does in a family of believers? God wires mothers to be this way. And he puts these same impulses in our hearts supernaturally when we join his family, whether or not we ever

marry or have biological children of our own. We are told in I Peter to “love one another earnestly from the heart” (1:22).

Last, Paul says he was like a mother in that he was “**ready to share himself**” with them. This is better translated “delighted to share his own soul.” How do you share your soul with someone? I think sharing your soul is what happens in Christian friendships, in Christian families, and in your small groups. It is sharing burdens, sharing failures, disappointments, joys, longings, and worries.

This past year our family has watched several people that we love go through some very difficult times. We’ve seen loved ones lose their jobs, lose their health, and even lose their children. We have observed that the difference between the grief support system of a believer and that of an unbeliever is profound. Within God’s family, there is a sharing of souls that takes place that is beyond what one might think fallen humans are capable of, and it provides immense support and comfort. Paul uses this same motherhood metaphor when he calls the Galatians his “little children” and says he is “in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed” in them” (4:19). Authentic gospel ministry is like motherhood. We need to be like a mother to one another. We need to have gentleness in our treatment of one another; we should have sweet affection for each other, and we should be delighted to share our souls.

Paul says authentic ministry is also **like fatherhood**. How? How is Paul like a father to the Thessalonian church? He did three things. **He exhorted, he encouraged, and he charged them.**

Exhort literally means “to call alongside.” The dictionary definition is “to urge, advise, or caution earnestly.” My oldest nephew is a senior in high school this year, and he will be going far away for college in the fall. It’s a big deal for my brother’s oldest child and only son to be leaving home, so throughout the school year my brother and sister-in-law have taken Steve out for Saturday breakfast about once a month. My brother has viewed these breakfasts as one last formal chance to exhort his son on topics like finances, employment, marriage, and church. I asked my nephew, “So, are you taking a lot of notes?” He replied, “Oh, I haven’t needed to. My dad wrote a syllabus for me!” That’s exhortation. That’s a very intentional coming alongside to “urge, advise, and caution earnestly.” That’s what a father does. And that’s what Paul did with the Thessalonians.

He also **encouraged** them. This word carries with it the idea of compassionate uplifting. It implies comfort and consolation in hardship. It’s the “Come on, you can do it. I know it’s hard, but you’ll be okay” thing that dads are so good at. My own dad excelled at this. When I think of his encouragement I think of algebra and all the teary evenings at the kitchen table, with my dad patiently explaining and encouraging me to try another problem. I also think of piano practice. From time to time I would get so frustrated with a difficult passage that I would give a WHAM to the keyboard in frustration. My dad

never hollered at me from the next room (“Quit your banging on that piano!!”); he never even said, “That is NOT appropriate, young lady.” He usually just came and quietly sat down next to me, saying something like, “That sounds hard. Try it again—would you play it for me?” That’s fatherly encouragement.

Finally, Paul **charged** them to “walk in a manner worthy of God.” Some places this word is translated “implore.” It contains an implied warning of discipline. In other words, “I implore you to walk in God’s ways or you’ll be so sorry. The consequences will be terrible. It’s my duty as a father to tell you this so you’ll know!” A good father reminds his children of discipline that must occur when there is disobedience.

Paul tells the Corinthian church to “Act like men; Be strong” (I Cor. 16:13). Just as there’s a gentle, motherly side to ministry, so there is a strong, fatherly element that is displayed in a balanced ministry that includes exhortation, encouragement, and a charge to grow in personal holiness.

The last big category for us to consider today is the **results of authentic gospel ministry**. That is, **some accept** it and **some reject** it. Let’s read about those that accept it. Look at verse 13: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.” There is a lot in that one sentence! What has happened here? The word “received” means that the word of God came to them; it was handed to them objectively through Paul’s preaching. But the word “accept” means “to welcome or embrace.” The Thessalonians heard Paul preach—they received the word—but in hearing Paul, they heard what his words really were, the word of God, and they accepted it. They welcomed it. Why did this happen? Chapter one said the word came to them “in power and in the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit caused their blind eyes to see and they accepted it.

But whether a listener accepts it or not, the Bible *is* still the word of God. There is a view of Scripture that says Scripture *becomes* the word of God when the hearer receives it as such. But that is not what this text says. Scripture is the word of God whether you or I accept it or not. Paul says that is *what it really is*.

And what does it do? It works in believers. It **changes** us. It conforms us to the image of Christ. It is “living and active” (Heb. 4:12). No other book is like that. I love good books, but I can’t say that Jane Eyre or Huckleberry Finn is at work in me. I can’t say that Pride and Prejudice is living and active or that David Copperfield is the word of God. So these Thessalonians accepted the word of God for what it is. And then it changed them by causing them to turn from idols to serve the living and true God.”

Notice, too, that Paul thanks God that this happened. He doesn’t say, “Aren’t you thankful to me that I preached to you?” No, because he knows that for anyone to accept the word of God like the Thessalonians did, that has to come from God. The

difference between someone listening to Scripture and saying, “Hmm. Interesting stuff” and someone who says, “This is the word of God” is God’s action in his heart. There is no room for arrogance. Don’t ever say about your unbelieving friend, “I just don’t see how she can’t get it!” If you’ve embraced the truth, you have experienced God’s grace and mercy in your heart, not superior reasoning powers. That’s why anyone believes.

What else happens to people who accept the word of God? The uncomfortable truth is that they are **persecuted**. Let’s go back to Acts 17. While you’re turning there, I’ll say that the Jews hated the teaching of Christianity because they didn’t believe that Jesus was the Messiah. The Gentiles hated it because Christianity basically said that the worship of the Greek and Roman gods was idolatry—that these gods didn’t even exist. So there was persecution from both ethnic groups.

Paul was actually driven out of the city he was in before he came to Thessalonica. You might know that he was in Philippi before Thessalonica; he and Silas were seized by the authorities, attacked, beaten with rods, and eventually thrown into prison. Now, if that had happened to me, I would think, “Well, the next place I go, I better be more careful. Think I’ll lay low for awhile.” But Paul was not afraid, and he preached in Thessalonica, he says in 2:2 with boldness. Here’s what happens next. We left off in verse 5 of Acts 17: “But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.’ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things.”

Go back now to I Thessalonians 2. Look at verse 2: “For though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.” He was bold. And see the logical relationship between 2:1 and 2:2. Paul ties “our coming to you was not in vain” with “we had boldness.” In other words, how do you *not* minister in vain? Be bold in speaking the gospel. Even when that boldness results in persecution. Always, throughout history, bold, clear presentation of the gospel has not often resulted in popularity. And the Thessalonian church apparently followed Paul’s example, because in 2:14 Paul says they, like the church in Judea, suffered at the hands of persecutors. And Paul saw their faithfulness through persecution as evidence that their faith was real. Paul wrote to Timothy: “All who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (II Tim. 3:12).

What about us? Are we exempt from this? We happen to live in a country where the kind of persecution Paul suffered is not the norm for Christians, and we can be thankful for that. But milder forms of persecution do occur. But I know Christians who have been passed over for promotions at work because of a Christian testimony. I know

Christians who have been ostracized by their families. Have you ever been mocked for your faith? I'm not talking about being mocked because you're being obnoxious in sharing your faith. That can happen, and we should make sure we're not being *unnecessarily* offensive when we talk about our faith. I'm talking about living a winsome Christian testimony and speaking kindly but boldly about Christianity. If you do that consistently, sooner or later, you will be mocked. ("You actually believe that stuff??" you'll hear with sneers.)

If you never have, you might want to ask yourself if you're really being bold like Paul or if you're being ashamed of the gospel. And the day may be coming when overt, severe persecution becomes common in our country—persecution like Paul faced and like believers face in China and India and Pakistan today. In that day, will our faith be as strong as that of the Thessalonians, who had only been Christians a short time?

Finally, what happens to **people who reject the word of God**? Paul talks about the Thessalonians' persecutors. He says, "You suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind . . ." The Jews here stand in contrast to people who accept the word. The Thessalonians accepted the word after brief exposure to it. The Jews, however, had a long and significant spiritual history. Yet they rejected the word of God sent to them first through the prophets, and then through Jesus, the Word made flesh. Paul says that persecutors are not on God's side. They displease him. His wrath is on them. God is angry with them. And what's more, those who persecute are not even on their *own* side. It says, "they oppose all mankind." Why is that? Because they try to keep the gospel—that could save themselves—from being heard.

The wrath of God is on them in some sense already, and it will fully fall on all who die having rejected Christ and his gospel. The end of this passage can be understood in a few different ways. The phrase "at last" can mean "the end." It has an immediate fulfillment of the wrath of God on their actions while they live. It also has a future fulfillment in Jerusalem's destruction in 70 AD. And then it has a final fulfillment in the judgment that will take place at the end of time.

The Thessalonian persecution apparently continued, because Paul picks up this theme in his second letter to them. He says, "We ourselves boast about you . . . for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God" (1:4-7).

But remember, Paul was once one of those very persecutors. He has to be writing this with more than a little sense of irony, knowing that he had been one of those Jews who displeased God and opposed all mankind, and, were it not for God's calling on his life, he would be headed for that same judgment. But God did call Paul. Peter writes about the final judgment, too, saying that God's delay in this is not because he is slow in keeping his promise; rather that he is "patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (II Pet. 3:9).

He waits, even for the persecutors of his church, to come to him. After God called and rescued Paul, he used him to help begin the work of world evangelism and discipleship--work that we continue today, using Paul's ministry as a model for our own.

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QUESTIONS FOR Christ Equips Us To Minister To Others

1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

Discussion Questions

1. Review. What are some things you learned from chapter one? Summarize it in a sentence or two.
2. What are specific ways that churches today or those in ministry can model Paul's ministry as he describes it in this section? What are ways we fall short (or how does the world perceive that we fall short?)
3. Verse 8 says, "We were ready to share with you . . . our own selves, because you had become very dear to us." Do you have friends and mentors in the church that do this? Do YOU do this with your sisters in Christ? How?
4. Have you accepted the word of God "for what it really is, the word of God" (2:13). If so, how or when did you come to that realization?

Study Intensive Questions

1. Review. What is the background of this book? Approximate date of its writing? Who wrote it? What's the main theme(s) of the book? Summarize chapter 1 in a sentence or two.
2. Read Luke's account of Paul in Philippi and Thessalonica in Acts 16:11-17:9. Describe Paul's experiences in these cities.
3. Now read I Thessalonians 2:1-16. Why was Paul's coming "not in vain"?
4. List several ways Paul describes and even defends his ministry in this section. What did he do? What did he NOT do? What are specific ways the church can model ministry like this?
5. What two metaphors does Paul choose to describe his interactions with these believers? How do these metaphors highlight different aspects of pastoral care?
6. Look at verse 8. What does it mean to share one's own self/soul?
7. Contrast Paul's description of the Thessalonian believers with the Jews in verses 13-16. 8. Have you accepted the word of God "for what it really is, the word of God" (2:13). If so, how or when did you come to that realization?

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