

1 Thessalonians 2

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In both our study and our practice, we as a congregation are very concerned with what the first-century church looked like. We believe that the Scripture provides us with a pattern for our work and worship that God intends for us to follow, and that if we do follow that pattern, that we can re-create that early church and please our Creator. However, this pattern has both a positive and a negative message. When we critique the denominational churches around us, it's not because we have some heartfelt antipathy toward them. It's because we can tell they aren't following the pattern.

However, the Bible's message about genuine Christianity in the first century isn't just limited to information about how the church should be organized. Instead, it tells us a great deal about what early Christians were like too. If we want to truly re-create the early church, brethren, then data like that will be just as important to us. We can't just be righteous in what we do as a body. We must be righteous in what we do as individuals as well.

When we turn our attention to the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians, we see that it's a marvelous place to turn to find this kind of pattern for our individual lives. As Paul so often does, we see him here mounting a defense of his apostleship. He goes back through the time he spent with the Thessalonians and reminds them of the specific actions he carried out that showed he was a genuine disciple of Christ, genuinely concerned for the welfare of those he taught.

This is important for us for two reasons. First, it shows us what church leaders should be like. The righteous church leader should be able to point to the good works in his own conduct that establish his bona fides. Likewise, the behavior that Paul condemns shows what the leader today should not be doing. Second, it teaches all of us how we should treat others if we want to gain spiritual influence with them. Let's look at these things in 1 Thessalonians 2.

Paul's Motivation.

In his opening words in the chapter, Paul describes his actions even in the face of **PERSECUTION**. Look with me at 1 Thessalonians 2:1-2. As is clear from this text, Paul's road to and through Thessalonica was paved with turmoil. He begins by alluding to a story the Thessalonians knew and we know, the story of his trials in Philippi. There, he and Silas were wrongfully beaten and imprisoned because his miraculous healing of a slave girl cost her masters a lot of money. Once Paul got to Thessalonica, he faced the more usual problem of howling mobs stirred up by envious Jews.

However, all of this opposition didn't keep Paul from his message. Even in the middle of such adverse circumstances, he continued to preach the word with boldness and saw his preaching bear fruit in the hearts of the Thessalonians. All of us can learn from his example. Too much of the time, we are silent about the gospel because we don't think the time is right to bring it up. As Paul's record shows, though, even in the most difficult situations, the word of God still has the power to pierce hearts and change lives. Let's remember that and be bold like Paul.

From there, Paul continues to explain the **PURPOSE** behind his preaching. This appears in 1 Thessalonians 2:3-4. Paul isn't dumb. He's not preaching an irrational gospel. Nor is he being crafty and preaching a gospel that will gain him some sort of advantage. As his record in Philippi and Thessalonica shows, his message isn't going to be a crowd-pleaser, and he's not aiming for that. Instead, this is a message that has been entrusted to him by God, and he's preaching it with the sole goal of pleasing God, and he knows that God is able to examine his heart and be pleased with it.

Just like we need to adopt Paul's behavior, so too we need to adopt his motivation. On the job or with our friends, there are topics we could bring up that would be men-pleasers. Most of the guys in the Chicago area this fall would probably be delighted to talk about the Bears for hours on end, especially if the Bears just lost and we're crying out for Lovie Smith's head. Most women are always happy to talk about babies and things like that.

However, the gospel is not a man-pleaser today any more than it was 2000 years ago. Emily Post would probably tell us that in polite conversation, you never talk about politics or religion. If we talk about our faith in Christ, lots of folks are going to head for the exits. We'll get a reputation at work, and it won't be a good one. But you know what? If that's what it takes to please God, that's what we have to do. If we have ten co-workers and one will hear the truth, the only way for us to find him is to get the other nine mad at us. As Paul's example shows, that's all part of the walk.

Paul also points out some possible **EVIL MOTIVATIONS** for preachers, and he says he isn't moved by these things in 1 Thessalonians 2:5-6. Paul didn't preach his gospel to curry favor with others, to get money from them, or to get a reputation in the eyes of others. He isn't just hypothesizing that preaching the gospel for those reasons was possible. Instead, he'd seen it, in those whom he described as "false apostles", who were all about the money and all about the glory they could get from others. There are plenty of false apostles today too. The airwaves are full of men who pretend to proclaim Christ for self-interested motives. Church leaders today need to make sure that they aren't in that number. Many men have sought the eldership, for instance, because they thought it would bring them honor in the eyes of others. Brethren, that's a terrible reason for service. It's right for us to wish to lead, but our goal must be service.

After that, Paul presents as their natural counterpart the **GOOD MOTIVATIONS** that do in fact cause his behavior. We find these in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8. After his desire to please God, Paul was motivated by a desire to bless the Thessalonians. He loved them, so he gave them not just the truth, but also himself. He was wholly devoted to their good. What's more, as he taught, he was just as gentle with them as a new mother would be with her baby.

It's important for us to add this gentleness to our picture of Paul's boldness. From our previous discussion of his work, we might come away with the idea that he marched into town without any real desire to save souls and got run off again because of his loud mouth. That's not what was going on. He was bold, yes, but he was also gentle and focused on the salvation of others. We shouldn't tell others about Jesus just so we can mark them off on our to-do list. Instead, we should reach out to the lost because we want them to be saved and share in the same spiritual blessings that we enjoy. If people can't tell from our words and actions that we're speaking out of genuine love, we will surely fail in our work.

What People Did.

Paul's claim to genuine love was backed up by the **EVIDENCE** of his behavior. He describes the first part of this evidence in 1 Thessalonians 2:9-10. All the way through his ministry, Paul was very sensitive to the charge that he was just preaching as a way to mooch money from the gullible. This had a huge impact on his behavior. As he says here, during his time in Thessalonica, he supported himself through his own work, probably through his trade of making tents, so that no one could accuse him of being a burden. Likewise, he conducted himself according to the standards of Christ.

There are lessons for us here in both of these points. First, many people in our time think that churches exist just to get money from their members. In many denominational churches, this is quite correct. Over the years and the centuries, they've gone so far from the gospel that they've built up a huge array of institutions that they have to support, from schools to hospitals. As a result, many denominations always have their hand out. They teach that their members have to tithe because that cash flow is the only way that they can keep afloat. When we reject those institutions, we're also rejecting those economic entanglements. The purity of the gospel keeps us out of financial trouble too.

Also, when we wish to teach the gospel to others like Paul did, we must take care to live like he did. We can be as bold as we want to be, we can be as gentle as we want to be, but unless we live a life that is holy and righteous and blameless like Paul's was, our conduct will undermine our message. Christianity is in the doing, not just the saying.

Paul points to yet more evidence for who he was in 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12. Part of what made him genuine was what he said. He didn't just feed the Thessalonians spiritual mush. Instead, by exhorting and encouraging and pointing them to Jesus, he constantly pushed them to get better, training them like a good father trains his children.

This also should give us some insight into what the genuine gospel looks and sounds like. There are many false teachers active today, and one of the things that false teachers most like to say is nothing. They tell people that God loves them, that they're fine just the way they are, that all they have to do to be a faithful Christian is just be happy. Preaching that message is a good way to fill a basketball arena with those who want to hear it, but it's a lousy way to get them to heaven. The genuine gospel is not just a feel-good hug. Instead, the message and the example of Christ constantly challenge us, calling us on to greater righteousness, greater commitment, and greater love. Sometimes, the true word of God will sting, just like the discipline of a father. However, we need that discipline in order to please Him.

Paul next outlines the **RESULTS** of this challenging kind of preaching. Consider with me 1 Thessalonians 2:13-14. The gospel isn't the easiest message to hear, but it is the truth, and the Thessalonians embraced the truth they heard. They recognized that the word came not from poor shabby Paul, but from the God of heaven, and they obeyed it. Sadly, this obedience put them in line for persecution from their countrymen just like it did for Jewish disciples, but they were willing to accept even that suffering for the prize before them. The genuine word made genuine Christians.

Today, the word has lost none of its ancient power. Just as there were good and honest hearts among the people of Thessalonica, there are good and honest hearts among the people of Joliet and Plainfield. If we have the courage to proclaim that word like Paul proclaimed it, if we challenge people to the upward call of God, some will take up the challenge. Over the past couple of years, we've seen some heartening growth in this congregation, and it proves that the word works. If we all devote ourselves to the spread of that word, we will be overwhelmed by the harvest.

However, not everyone took the gospel the way Paul wanted them to. Some, in fact, became **ENEMIES OF THE GOSPEL**. Paul describes these in 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16. Even though the Jews had been God's chosen people for 1500 years, even though they had been entrusted with the Scripture that proclaimed the Messiah, most Jews rejected both Jesus and those who preached Him. The reason was simple. Once they realized that the gospel was for all, Jew and Gentile alike, they couldn't stand the thought of being on the same spiritual plane with the non-Jews they despised.

Today, if we preach the gospel in its completeness, we will make enemies too. Jesus had enemies, Paul and the apostles had enemies, and modern-day disciples should expect to have them. Too often, though, we are so afraid of offending people that we don't teach the message. When we're tempted to be silent, though, we need to remember that we can't please both God and the world. We have to pick a side, and what we say shows the side we picked.