

Serving Like the Savior

1 Thessalonians 2:6-12

*The nurse clicked down the hall and shook her head.
Despite the baby's screams, she'd got her blood,
Proud that her patience was unlimited.
But in the room, the sobbing child was dead;
Her fragile heart endured more than her share
Of prodding pins and pills that could not cure.
But in the end no child can long endure
The scowl and sneer of those who do not care.
Unmeasured miles away and lost in years,
A black robed nun with shining, sparkling eyes
Helped those who hurt. An angel in disguise,
She soothed the sick with tenderness and tears.
She knew that in life's fleeting hourglass
A loveless heart's a cymbal's sounding brass.*

The apostle Paul was no stranger to criticism. From the moment he returned to Jerusalem after coming to Christ, the former persecutor was constantly criticized.

At Thessalonica, unbelieving Jews not only waged war against the apostle. When Paul slipped out of town, they followed him to Berea and stirred up trouble against him there.

Do not be misled. The great missionary was not so frail and fragile that he was easily wounded by ugly words. And that is good. For in his absence, Christ's enemies bombarded new believers with caustic criticism of the man who led them to faith in Jesus Christ.

They charged that Paul was a craven coward who sneaked out of town in the dead of night to avoid being persecuted. Worse yet, they sneered, he callously left his followers behind to bear the brunt of Jewish opposition.

Robed rabbis also declared the former pharisee was a false teacher who was consumed with a craving for gold and glory. And they constantly and continually charged that Paul used flattery and deceptive tactics to please powerful people.

Experienced pastors are familiar with those kind of charges. And most ministers have learned to turn a deaf ear to them.

Sure, some people might leave the congregation for another church. But they will still get the Gospel. So answering stray charges is both a waste of time and a distraction to the church family.

However, Paul was not so fortunate. There was simply no one else saints at Thessalonica could turn to.

All the other apostles had scattered to the four winds, proclaiming Christ in far flung ports and foreign provinces. So the great missionary was the only preacher of the Gospel available to believers at Thessalonica.

That is why Paul had to answer the charges angry Jews were pouring into the ears of newborn saints. And that is just what he did.

He told Thessalonian Christians the plain truth about how and what he did as God's servant. And telling them, he also tells us.

Authority

Paul neither applied nor volunteered to be an apostle. Both then and now, that is quite simply impossible.

After all, an apostle was a personally appointed messenger for the Lord Jesus Christ. So only the Savior could do the choosing.

Christ is the one who called men like James and John, Peter and Paul to serve as apostles and bear the message of salvation through faith in His shed blood and empty tomb.

Of course, when the infant church was still walking on wobbly legs, just about anyone could claim to be an apostle. But only a genuine, Christ-called apostle could prove it.

...in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. 2 Corinthians 12:11-12

The ability to perform miracles was every true apostle's credentials. And time and time again, Paul provided proof of his apostleship by performing wonder works.

As an apostle, Paul had eminent and important authority. Only an apostle could define what the Gospel message really is. And only such a personally called and commissioned messenger could define what salvation requires.

An apostle also had authority over born again believers. Both then and now, he was the one who decided what Christians should believe and how they should behave.

He defined the standards for a saint's marriage and family. In fact, he was called by God to set standards for virtually every area of a believer's life, from family relationships to business relationships, from friendships to finances.

An apostle also had the right and authority to receive financial support from God's people.

...the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel. But I have used none of these things. 1 Corinthians 9:14-15

Yes, as an apostle, Paul had great, God-given authority. But just as every other servant of Jesus must, he was to imitate the Master.

And Christ's authority on earth was so unlimited, it even extended to nature itself. Nevertheless, our loving Lord seldom stood on that authority. He never flaunted his authority or demanded His rights. So Paul did not either.

He could have laid down and enforced strict rules for the redeemed at Thessalonica. But he did not. Instead, he acted with all the care, compassion and tenderness of a nursing mother.

But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Verse 7

A mother cradles and cares for her newborn infant. And when that child is fussy or fuming, she is not wounded or resentful.

She understands that her child is in its infancy. And immaturity is to be expected. So she is patient with her child.

Instead of punishing her baby, she feeds it. And she feeds her baby what it needs.

...like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord. 1 Peter 2:2-3

Therefore, when believers showed their immaturity, Paul and the other apostles did not criticize or castigate them. They fed them.

I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? 1 Corinthians 3:2-3 (NKJV)

Even when believers oppose Christ's called servants, just like apostles, they are not to fight back. Instead, they are to feed them.

The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, 2 Timothy 2:24-25

Yes, Paul could have stood on his authority as an apostle. But like the Lord Himself, he chose not to. He was like a patient mother not a demanding dictator.

And if we would serve the Savior, we must do the same. We must serve with the humility, patience and kindness.

Affection

Only a few of the people Paul led to faith in the Lord Jesus were wealthy and powerful. Most of them were not. And even those who were wealthy were pinched by persecution.

Most of the believers at Thessalonica lived on a subsistence level. Some were slaves. Others were day laborers.

So the great missionary refused to accept another of his rights and authorities as an apostle.

For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. Verse 9

Paul neither expected nor accepted any offerings from saints at Thessalonica. Instead, he got a day job sewing leather tents to meet his financial needs and did his preaching and teaching at night.

And he did so for one simple reason. He had great affection and compassion for the people he brought to faith in Christ.

Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. Verse 8

Very early in my ministry, a quiet man with gray hair showed up at church one Sunday morning. Later, he told me he was not really old enough to retire. But his wife had contracted cancer.

So he left a very successful ministry, bought a small house a few miles from my church and tried to reconcile himself to the way the Lord had led in his life.

I am one of the reasons why that man came to live in my neighborhood. Over the next few months, he took me in hand and taught me the nuts and bolts of serving the Savior as a pastor.

And he repeated one lesson over and over again. First and foremost, he said, a pastor must love the people he serves.

That love cannot be a high and holy spiritual pretense, either. His love must be as genuine as Jesus' love for people was.

He taught me that I must not only love those who are in need. I must also love people who are cold and carnal, proud and pompous.

I must even love those who bitterly oppose me. It will make no difference, he said, what else I do if I do not love people.

That is the kind of love the apostle Paul had for people at Thessalonica. He loved them as a group. And he loved each and every one of them individually.

That requirement is not limited to apostles, pastors and missionaries, either. No matter who we might be or how we might serve, our first requirement is to love the people we serve.

It applies to Sunday school teachers and youth workers, church officers and personal witnesses. We cannot serve the Savior on any level if we fail to overflow with our Lord's love for people.

That love is what moved and motivated everything Paul did. Yes, he did slip out of Thessalonica in secret. But he did not do so to save his own skin.

He could clearly see his presence was feeding and fueling the persecution saints in that city were experiencing and enduring. So he left, alone and unsupported.

That is also why the great apostle constantly and continually fed those people with the Word of God. He taught them the riches of Christ because he loved them.

That must also be our motive with people. We are to share the riches of our Redeemer with people because we love them.

And the Lord Jesus not only commanding us to love those who oppose us. He also did so Himself.

That is why our Savior spent so much time trying to teach men like the scribes and pharisees: men who were plotting His murder. He called them to His heavenly Father because He loved them. He spoke of that call one day as He wept over Jerusalem's coming holocaust.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Matthew 23:37

If we are to share our Lord's love with the lost and the lonely, we must shine with that same love. We must genuinely, sincerely and deeply love the people we would witness to.

As my mentor told me so many times, it will not make any difference what else we might do. If we do not love both the people we serve and those we would call to Christ, nothing else will matter.

Our God is love. And we must show that love.

Admonitions

Paul not only modeled his ministry after a loving mother. He was also a father to Christians at Thessalonica.

And God's Word declares that every father has authority over his home. As the head of his home, he especially exercises authority over his children.

That is kind of authority Paul had over the Thessalonians. But he rarely exercised it.

He made every effort to stop short of being a director and lawgiver. Instead, he chose to counsel, comfort and correct new Christians with great tenderness, sensitivity and love.

He started where every father and everyone who serves the Savior must. He lived as a godly example for them.

You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; Verse 10

For one thing, Paul was careful to be religiously **devout**. The Jews condemned him as a heretic.

But that was a lie.

Yes, as a redeemed child of God, Paul was under grace, not the Law of Moses. Nevertheless, the great missionary obeyed all of the rituals and regulations of the Law.

At the same time, he was **upright** in his relationships with other people. In fact, he was so scrupulous in how he dealt with people, they could not find any legitimate reason to blame him.

If we who love and live for the Lord Jesus are serious about serving the Savior, we must be every bit as **blameless** in our personal behavior as Paul was in his. He imitated the Master.

And the Lord Jesus was so pure and perfect, He even dared His bitterest enemies to try to find any unrighteousness in Him.

It is never excusable for a saint to be self-righteous. But that does not mean we are to indulge any wrong in our life. Just like our Savior's was, our life is to be blameless.

Also, rather than command new Christians, Paul counseled the people he served at Thessalonica.

...just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, Verse 11

Throughout the months the Master's missionary ministered to the Thessalonians, he taught them. He **exhorted** and urged them to stand strong for the Savior. And he urged them to love and live for the Lord in every area of life.

However, sometimes exhortation was not what people needed. Almost overnight, persecution became savage and severe. And some saints lost their lives.

So some people needed to be comforted and **encouraged**. And the word Paul used for *encouraging* is the same word our Savior used to describe the Holy Spirit.

People in sorrow over lost loved ones needed to be comforted. And saints who were full of anxiety and fear over persecution needed to be encouraged.

That is what our Savior's Spirit does for us. And that is what Paul did for the saints he served.

Like many of us do today, sometimes Christians at Thessalonica wobbled on the razor edge of sin. They did not need to be berated or badgered. They needed to be pleaded with.

So that is what Paul did. He begged and **implored** people to stand strong and keep their commitment to Christ.

Ministering like the Master requires both sensitivity and discernment. With the insight and understanding the Holy Spirit can give us, we must diagnose what people need. Then we must tailor our ministry to that specific need.

Still, in the end, the apostle Paul had but one message for those Thessalonian believers. He put it simply.

...that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. Verse 12

Our loving Lord laid down His life, He shed His blood that we might be cleansed. Then His Spirit called us to become a part of His kingdom of love and light.

And one day soon, He will call us away to His everlasting glory in Heaven. We must never lose sight of that. It must guide us in our every daily decision.

At all costs, we must live a life that is worthy of the King we serve. We are citizens of a heavenly kingdom.

And our lives should show it.