

GOD'S KINGDOM AND HIS GLORY

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Chapters 2 and 3 of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians give us more insight into Paul's pastoral heart than anything else in the NT. Here he discloses his mind, expresses his emotions and bares his soul. Our reading today is full of rich family language and imagery and I don't think anyone can fail to be touched or challenged by it, so let's study it together and as we do so the relevant verses will be displayed on the screen or you can find the main passage on page [***] of the church Bibles.

First we need to look at the background. The brief mission in Thessalonica had been brought to an ignominious end. Paul's whole mission in Thessalonica may have only lasted for a few weeks (Acts 17:1-10). The public riot and the legal charges against the missionaries were so serious that they were persuaded to make a humiliating night flight from the city. Paul's critics took full advantage of his sudden disappearance. In order to undermine his authority and his gospel, they determined to discredit him, saying that he was a false teacher who just ran away abandoning his flock and not caring about them when there was any opposition. Paul must have found these attacks very painful. Chapters 2 and 3 of Thessalonians (which really follow on from what is an introduction in chapter 1) are his reply to these charges – not because he wants to defend himself personally, but because he wants to defend the gospel message. In our reading today Paul defends his conduct whilst he was in Thessalonica.

In verses 1 and 2, Paul starts by expressing the success and openness of his ministry and his willingness to suffer:

“You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.” (verses 1-2)

In the Greek text verse 1 begins with a “for” which the NIV omits and this shows the connection with chapter 1. Paul is saying that even after suffering in Philippi (where we know from Acts chapter 16 that he was beaten with rods and jailed) he still had the courage to preach the gospel in Thessalonica and he’s saying that his efforts and his mission were not a failure, they were not fruitless. The Greek verb *parrēsiāzomai*, translated ‘dared’ by the NIV means to ‘speak freely, openly, fearlessly’ that’s how Paul preached the Gospel. Here, Paul is reminding the Thessalonians that they are already aware of all this – he uses the words “you know” twice.

Next as Paul recalls his visit to the Thessalonians he depicts it with three metaphors. The first of these is implied, but the last two are stated plainly. Firstly, there is the idea of stewardship in verses 3 and 4, secondly the idea of motherhood in verses 5 to 8, and thirdly the idea of fatherhood in verses 9 to 12.

Let’s start with stewardship in verses 3 and 4:

“For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.” (verses 3-4)
The word ‘steward’ does not actually appear in the text, but the concept of stewardship is implicit in the phrase *entrusted with the gospel* in verse 4. God had entrusted the Gospel to Paul. Paul comes back to this idea a number of times in his other letters when he wants to express his sense of privilege in having had the Gospel committed to him (e.g. Galatians 2:7; 1 Timothy 1:11) or his sense of responsibility to be faithful to his stewardship (e.g. 1 Corinthians 4:1-2; 2 Timothy 2:2).

Before Paul really develops the stewardship concept he makes it clear in verse 3 that his appeal – that’s the gospel he had already preached to the Thessalonians not what he’s saying now – doesn’t come from error (because the Gospel is true), nor did it come from impure motives. He wasn’t out for material gain as so many itinerant preachers of that time were. The philosopher Dio Chrysostom railed

against those philosophers who would roll into a town “with a view to their own profit and reputation, and not to improve you”. Finally Paul says his appeal wasn’t devious, he wasn’t trying to trick them or deceive them. So, in both what Paul said, and in why and how he said it, he was free from anything underhand.

Paul develops the stewardship metaphor in verse 4. He’s not trying to please men but rather God whose steward he is. This idea of pleasing men rather than God still needs emphasis today, because the Christian preacher is always tempted to accommodate his message to the desires of his hearers. People don’t want a message that tells them that they are helpless sinners and that they must depend humbly on God’s mercy for their salvation – but that’s what they need to hear.

In the NIV translation of verse 4, it says that God tests our hearts, but the Greek word used here *Dokimazō* carries the sense of having been tested and approved. So Paul is saying that he is approved by God. It’s because of this successful testing, this approval, that God has made Paul a steward of the Gospel. So we see that Paul’s ministry is completely God Centred, he’s not responsible to men but to God himself. His message is free from error because it comes from God.

Before expressing his mother love for the Thessalonians, Paul continues the theme of verses 3 and 4 in verses 5 to 8:

“You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.” (verses 5-8)

Paul starts negatively by repeating his claim to be free of unworthy motives. He isn’t trying gain influence by what the NIV expresses as flattery, which in this context means deception by slick eloquence. Aristotle distinguishes between friends and flatterers, saying, “The man who always joins in the pleasures of his companions, if he sets out to be pleasant for no ulterior motive, is Obsequious; if he does so

for the sake of getting something by it in the shape of money or money's worth, he is a Flatterer.” Plutarch was so concerned about flatterers that he wrote a whole treatise about how to distinguish between them and true friends. The ancients recognized that flattery was evidence of the bad character of the person who used it to persuade others or move them to action. The apostles never flattered their audience in an attempt to gain something for themselves. The Thessalonians knew this well.

Also, Paul isn't trying to serve his own material ends, he didn't hide his real motives for personal profit. This was widely condemned. Both Chrysostom and Plutarch condemn those speakers who are motivated simply by financial gain. Nor is Paul seeking praise from men (verse 6) - for God is his master. Both the Thessalonians and God are witnesses to Paul's good character. Also, neither Paul or the other apostles with him (Silas certainly and possibly Timothy, although Timothy is never called an apostle elsewhere) ordered the Thessalonians around or sought to be paid or supported. They weren't a burden to the Thessalonians – although the sense here is that they might have expected to be able to demand such support. Instead Paul and the others were gentle among them like a mother caring for her children (verse 7). We all need to cultivate more in our Christian lives the gentleness, love and self-sacrifice of a mother. We need to give ourselves to the care of others. Real Christian service is costly. Paul also says that they gave themselves to minister to the Thessalonians (verse 8) and that they did this because they loved them with a selfless *agape* love – the concluding words of verse 8 might be better expressed as ‘for you have become beloved to us’. Paul's saying that his rapid departure from Thessalonica shouldn't be interpreted as meaning that he didn't care for these new believers.

It's striking that Paul goes on to liken himself to their father as well as their mother in verses 9 to 12:

“Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who

believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.” (verses 9-12)

Again Paul begins negatively by reverting to the fact that he was not a burden to any of the Thessalonians even whilst he preached the gospel to them, even though some of them were wealthy (Acts 17:5, 7, 9).

Indeed he was trying so hard not to be a burden that he worked day and night. Probably they preached by day and worked by night – Paul at least presumably followed his craft as a tent maker to earn his living. The double function of evangelism and earning a living had meant hard work for them. We know that some gifts were sent to Paul from the Philippian church, even while he was in Thessalonica (Philippians 4:15-16), but these were evidently inadequate for his needs, perhaps because the Macedonian churches suffered from ‘extreme poverty’ (2 Corinthians 8:1-2). Note that Paul preached the gospel of God. The gospel preacher is not at liberty to substitute his view of the need of the moment for the God-given message of the cross.

Instead of being a burden to them, he had been like a father to them, by both his example and his instruction. As for his example, they and God both were together *witnesses ... how holy, righteous and blameless* he had been among the believers (verse 10). Paul cites both the Thessalonians and God as witnesses because a matter had to be established by the testimony of at least two witnesses. I don’t think we should attempt to distinguish too neatly between the three words Paul uses in verse 10, but ‘holy’ seems to refer to our being ‘devout, pious, pleasing to God’, ‘righteous’ to our dealings with our neighbours, and ‘blameless’ to our public reputation. Paul evidently saw his example as part of his fatherly duty, so that he continued: *For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children* (verse 11), *encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory* (verse 12).

Paul seems to be thinking especially of the educational role of fathers, who, in addition to setting their children a consistent example (verse 10), should also encourage, comfort and exhort them. He's also implying that he gave each one of the Thessalonians individual attention. Here Paul found himself urging the Thessalonians to live worthily of God and his kingdom, and even 'insisting' on that. Since it was part of his teaching that the kingdom of God has both a present manifestation and a future glory, I believe he was appealing to the Thessalonians to live a life worthy both of their dignity now and of their destiny at the end.

So in his pastoral care of the Thessalonians Paul exhibited the complete caring roles of both the mother and the father all the time being a faithful steward of the gospel that God had entrusted to him.

So what does all this mean for us here today? Well, first of all we see that we need to live our Christian lives in an upright honest and straightforward way, not taking advantage of others or being a burden to them – just as Paul did whilst he was with the Thessalonians. We need to be holy, righteous and blameless in all aspects of our lives. People will judge we Christians harshly if we don't maintain strict Biblical standards in all aspects of our lives. They'll try anything to put us down, just as Paul was being damned by a false and malicious smear campaign based on lies and rumours. We must live lives worthy of our present position and our final destiny, just as Paul urged the Thessalonians to do.

Next we see that we need to sacrifice our lives in the service of others as Paul did amongst the Thessalonians.

Further, we see that we need to be prepared to stand up for our Christian faith in spite of any persecution we encounter just as Paul did. We need to proclaim the gospel fearlessly in spite of any ridicule prejudice or worse that we encounter. Vance Havner once said "we do not have a secret to be hidden but a story to be heralded." And he also said "The gospel is not something we come to church to hear; it is something we go from church to tell." But, we must at all times

present the gospel honestly and fairly. God is our master and we seek his “well done thou good and faithful servant” on the day of judgement and not the fickle useless praise of men.

Finally and most importantly, remember the final words of our reading – God calls us into his kingdom and glory. Our lives need to be oriented towards that calling. Let us try and live lives worthy of that most high calling so that we may share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ in God’s Kingdom.

Let’s just close with a few words of prayer. Father we pray that Your Holy Spirit will move powerfully in our lives so that we may be enabled to live good and righteous lives worthy of your magnificent calling of us into Your Kingdom and Glory. In Jesus’ name we pray.