

Not Only the Gospel – 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

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Relational Timidity

Nine and a half years ago I sat at a table in a Chipotle in suburban Minneapolis. Across from me sat a woman who was probably a mix of confused and excited. You see we sat there for a very specific conversation—we were going to “DTR.” If you haven’t lived in the bubble of a small Christian college, that means we were going to “discuss the relationship.” She wanted to know what my intentions were. And what some may characterize as relational timidity, I thought was pretty clever. My thoughts were that we would be “intentional friends.” That’s right, “intentional friends.” That isn’t quite what she wanted to hear. But she was patient, I grew in my boldness, and she became Mrs. Toney.

One’s degree of boldness directly corresponds to your confidence in the subject you are endeavoring to be bold about. I was not too confident in myself or where I wanted the relationship to go, so I was not very bold. But an ace pitcher has boldness to throw a fast ball right down the middle against a top slugger because he has confidence in his pitch. And we see in our passage this morning that the Apostle Paul had boldness to proclaim the gospel to the Thessalonians because of his confidence in the powerful truth of the message and in the One who commissioned him to proclaim it.

It appears necessary for Paul to talk about his ministry among the Thessalonians because of how short a time he was with them and how quickly he left. We read in Acts 17 that Paul was in Thessalonica for only about three weeks before being driven out by a mob. Even in that short time, God powerfully saved sinners through Paul’s proclamation. This is what Paul tells the church in chapter one, where he recounts his gratitude for the vibrant, gospel-advancing faith of this church. He doesn’t want them to be shaken by questions regarding his intentions among

them. He wants them to be encouraged to endure in the faith knowing that their founding pastor is wonderfully *for* them, despite his brief tenure among them. Paul's ministry in Thessalonica was not in vain because of his boldness that was motivated by a desire to please God and see this church pleasing God.¹

Evangelistic Boldness Produces Ministry Fruitfulness (v.1-2)

It is a bit surprising that Paul feels compelled to convince the Thessalonians that his ministry was not in vain. After all, they are now Christians. Before Paul came and preached, they were dead in their sins. It seems that this would be self-evident to the church. But he reminds them of the manner in which he came. By drawing attention to this aspect of his ministry, he is implicitly calling the Thessalonians and us to imitate him.

His ministry was not in vain because he had boldness *in God*. He had just rolled into town from being freshly beaten and jailed in Philippi, yet he continues to “declare the gospel of God.” I think Paul is intentionally accentuating where his confidence lies. His boldness was not from his eloquent speech or past ministry success. He had boldness *in God* to declare the gospel *of God*. This captures the nature of Christian proclamation, whether from a pulpit or a patio. We are heralds who have been given a message by the Sovereign King. The message and authority comes from the King. Paul does not, nor do we, shrink back from declaring the King's message in the face of opposition. We fear him more than those who can beat and imprison us.

There is a garden in England that is full of plants that can kill you. All varieties of poisonous plants that have the ability to kill you in different ways. Now imagine tourists come in droves to check out this garden. The gardener, being empowered by the knowledge of the truth about these plants, vehemently warns people to use caution. But being foolish tourists, they shout

¹ I was helped by Greg Beale's explanation of the structure of this passage in *1-2 Thessalonians*, IVPNTC (IVP: Downers Grove, 2003), 76.

him down and push him out of the way. He doesn't stop warning people despite the response he receives, for if even saves one from death it would be worthwhile. He has a greater respect for the power of these plants than the vitriol of the tourists.

Paul's message, our message, is far more vital because we are not talking merely of death in this life. As a race, humanity has rebelled against the holy God who will carry out his justice lest we repent and turn to Jesus as our only hope for deliverance. Paul had boldness to proclaim this gospel because he knew the threat of eternal conscious punishment was real, but he also knew that Jesus really saves sinners. And having such boldness in the face of opposition and much conflict, his message was fruitful and not vanity. Perhaps one reason why we don't see more fruitfulness in our evangelistic efforts is that we are too timid.

But don't be mistaken. It was not merely Paul's boldness that brought about the joyful reception of the gospel in Thessalonica. That fruitfulness was a result of the gospel coming to them "not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit" (1:5). But if Paul got cold feet after his experience at Philippi and tried to be more politically correct, there would not have been the reception that there was. I'll be the first to admit that boldness is lacking in my evangelism. But may we see Paul's example, consider the King who has sent us, and open our mouths when before we have been silent.

Personal God-Pleasing Undergirds Boldness (v.3-4)

Now not only did Paul have boldness because of his confidence in God and the gospel, but he also had boldness because of his earnest desire to please God. He was not like those so-called preachers, whether in the first or twenty-first century, who were peddling a message to make easy money. Paul wanted to be found faultless in the ministry entrusted to him by God. He is going about his vocation in the very way he calls all of us to go about our work in Ephesians

6:6-7, “Not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man.”

Paul knows there is a day of reckoning coming when he will stand before the Judgment Seat. There will indeed be those who do much in the name of the Lord, who prophesy, cast out demons, and do many mighty works, yet Jesus will say to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matthew 7:21-23). Rather, Paul wants to hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant . . . Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:23).

It is fitting for us to reflect on this as we start afresh in new ministry opportunities and areas of service this Fall. As you go about serving in the nursery, teaching kids the Bible, leading a small group, packing boxes of food, or mentoring a believer newer to the faith, is there any error, any impurity, any attempt to deceive, or any desire to please man in what you are doing? There isn't financial gain, but is there a desire to put up a front? To “look the part”? May we ever strive in the ministries we're called to serve to not please man but to please God. Having our focus there, on pleasing God, serves our boldness as we are not hampered by the fear of man. If we are more concerned about what people think of us than we are about what God will say of our ministry, we will succumb to cultural pressure to soften or outright change the gospel we preach. But when we are focused on serving the advance of the gospel in a manner pleasing to God, we are freed to speak the truth of the gospel in boldness.

Corporate God-Pleasing Undergirds Boldness (v.5-12)

Paul continues to describe the manner of his ministry among the Thessalonians, but he is now driving toward the purpose statement in v.12. He is saying he acted the way he did in order that they would “walk in a manner worthy of God.” Not only did he have boldness because of *his*

desire to please God, but he wanted this *church* to be pleasing to God. He didn't want his manner of life to hinder *their* Christian walk.

Apostolic Motherhood (v.5-8)

So he did not come to them as though he wanted something *from* them, whether praise or monetary gain. He could have thrown his weight around. He could have strolled into town like a big shot apostle who has even suffered for the gospel and made demands of them once they confessed faith in Christ. But he didn't. He didn't seek glory in this life. His ministry was not his greatest joy. Jesus was. Rather than acting like he was a big deal, he was "gentle." The word the ESV translates as "gentle" actually is "infant." Paul was unassuming like a baby among them. Or, mixing metaphors, he was like a nursing mother among them. He was selfless in his care. We all know how moms care so well for others, but moms are especially caring toward their own children. It didn't matter how many times he had to get up in the night, he saw to it that this newborn church received spiritual milk.

Paul looked on these new Christians like a mom does her baby. The first time she holds that baby her heart is utterly bound to the welfare of this child. Paul was the same way with them. He was there when they were born again, and he yearns for their eternal good. They immediately were deeply loved by him. It is in this context that Paul writes a rather surprising statement. "We were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves" (v.8). *Not only* the gospel? Something was lacking in his bold, fruitful, God-pleasing gospel proclamation? Yes. His preaching needed to be accompanied by a transformed life.

Like a mom, he was ready to share his whole self with these saints. All that he was, he was ready to impart to them. This is not unlike a similarly shocking statement in Colossians 1:24 where Paul says he is "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of the body,

that is, the church.” Seeing Paul suffer for the sake of Christ made the realities of Christ’s atoning death all the more real to a people removed by time and space from Calvary. And sharing his very soul, as the verse originally reads, communicates the power of the gospel to take a Hell-bent sinner and transform him into a zealous evangelist.

Doctrine is important, but more often than not it is seeing that doctrine play out in the trenches of life that disciples are built up. Think of it in your own life. What has been more impactful in deepening your hope in the sovereignty of God, reading a systematic theology or seeing a loved one suffer faithfully? Both are needed. Paul’s bold preaching was sufficient to bring the Thessalonians to faith, but they needed more than that to grow up in the faith.

Sharing not only the gospel but our very souls is hard. It requires vulnerability. It requires risk. It requires putting yourself out there for someone else to see the unsanctified parts of your life so they can learn how to grow in grace. We ought not be so preoccupied with how holy we look. After all, Paul’s aim we are to imitate here is that *others* learn to walk in a manner worthy of God, a manner pleasing to God. Are there people in your life you intentionally pursue in order to pull the curtain back some so they can see what life is really like? People to whom you say, “I don’t live perfectly, but Lord willing, I live faithfully.” And maybe you don’t even need to pursue them; perhaps they are already there. Your small group, the kids you teach in Sunday school, your spouse—do you share not only the gospel but your very soul with them?

Apostolic Fatherhood (v.9-12)

Paul isn’t just motherly towards the Thessalonians. He is also fatherly. He worked seemingly tirelessly while with them. Not only did he labor hard, but he talked firmly with them as well. His ministry wasn’t soft and warm fuzzies. He exhorted this church. He challenged them in their sin. He held them accountable. Speaking a firm, fatherly word to them was needed to

provide correction and keep them walking in a worthy manner. And he was only with them for about three weeks—that says something about objections we might raise saying we need time to build the relationship before speaking like this.

Now note the beautiful complementarity of Paul's pastoral demeanor. He is a tender, loving mother and a firm, truth-telling father. Alistair Begg helpfully commented on these verses, "Truth is hard, if it is not softened by love. And love is soft, if it is not hardened by truth."² Both motherly love and fatherly truth are needed to provide balance in our disciple-making. Both giving our own souls and speaking the truths of the gospel and its implications are needed.

Let your disciple-making be characterized like this. Be bold and confident in the God of the gospel who has commissioned you to make his glory known. Don't shy back; you have a message that needs to be heard. But be tender, compassionate, and selfless. Empathize with those you are discipling, and bring them in to your own struggles. And be strong, clear, and exhortative. We must not coddle those younger in the faith but winsomely call them out of their sin to walk worthy. Men, perhaps you need to be more motherly—you tend too much towards exhortation and declarations. The person you are discipling may need you to express some selfless care and affection. Women, perhaps you need to be more fatherly—you tend too much towards emotion and feelings. The person you are discipling may need you to be more direct in telling them what God is calling them to do or feel.

We imitate Paul in making disciples in this kind of way knowing that the King is going to accomplish his good purposes. We're told at the end of v.12 that he has called us into his kingdom. There is a day coming when his heavenly reign will be put on universal display in a

² Alistair Begg, "Truth and Love," a sermon preached on February 12, 1995. Available at <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/truth-and-love/>

new heavens and new earth. Our great hope in this life is that we have already been brought into that kingdom; our citizenship has been transferred. We will be participants of his glory. This new status wonderfully frees us to speak with boldness and confidence. It frees us from people-pleasing. We don't need to seek glory from people (v.6) because we have been called into God's own glory.

We can be confident that our gospel ministry will not be in vain if we imitate the Apostle, if we share in his confidence in God to declare the gospel of God. If our disciple-making efforts are focused on pleasing God and seeing to that those we disciple also are found pleasing in his sight, then we'll hear the "well done."

Coming to the Table Together

As we come to the Table, it is good for us to be reminded that we don't make disciples on our own. We aren't flying solo in our efforts to boldly declare the good news about Jesus. We have partners in ministry; we have brothers and sisters who partner with us. What a help this is! We don't have to be everything for those we seek to disciple. We have a community of saints who are strong where we are weak.

It is this community that comes to this Table to be reminded of the very work we proclaim. Here we are reminded that first we must not believe the gospel in vain before we turn in boldness to share that news with others. So may we be reminded that our confidence is in Christ to save sinners and not in our boldness, not in how pleasing we are to God, and not in our abilities to balance love and truth.