



“God, sideways...”

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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Church
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- 1 Thess 2:7 - 20 -
7 But we were gentle among
you, just as a nursing
[mother] cherishes her own
children. 8 So,
affectionately longing 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 dear to us. 9 For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God. 10 You [are] witnesses, and God [also], how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; 11 as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father [does] his own children, 12 that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. 13 For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed [it] not [as] the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. 14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they [did] from the Judeans, 15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, 16 forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up [the measure of] their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost. 17 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire. 18 Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us. 19 For what [is] our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? [Is it] not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? 20 For you are our glory and joy.

There was something about this group of people that brought Paul a great deal of joy. He spoke to this church and of this church in ways that were anything but normal for Paul, in that it seemed he spent most of his letter writing energies correcting and warning. But *this* church...while not perfect, was indeed *different*. They “held the line” despite being under some significant persecution. This was not some “seeker-friendly” church, but more like a marine unit in the midst of a war. They backed each other, held together in unity, supported their leaders, and kept their heads about them. They had the attitude of “never leaving a man behind.” This was rare in that day, perhaps as rare as it is today.

We have already read that this Thessalonian church was a chosen-by-God...that they were a “called out people.” They were called out of the world as we know it, to live *in* and *through* a different dynamic. There was a clear evidence in this church of redemption change. Of characteristics that accompany a spiritual infilling...the fruit of the Spirit. They were practicing a ‘phileo’ brotherly-love daily-interaction with one another while still firmly grounded in what was an *agape* love foundation ...a “God love” example. The text has already reported on their “work of faith,”...their “labor of love,” and their “patience of hope” in Jesus Christ.

These changes and these profound attributes served as witness to Paul of their true salvation state. These folks were *disciples*. And the reason I stop to emphasize these facts...the reason for this message in general, is because

we cannot deny that such readily serves as a genuine phenomenon in today's greater church world, not to mention as much within the average confessing Christian. Let's face it...we live in a day wherein the average church-going individual that "flies the flag of faith" overwhelmingly lives the same in most every way as the average guy in the world.

It seems that most folks...even a large amount of the purely secular, have a grasp on the vertical aspect of Christianity. The "I-pray-up-to-God" scenario wherein God is expected on some level therein to respond *down to us*. Certainly that is both real and necessary. However, the problem begins where that vertical relationship ends, because Christianity...*by its very innate nature*, exists to have an equally crucial *horizontal* manifest. A "God, *sideways*." A loving, patient and other-centered interaction with the people who are around us on any given day, *especially* those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ! Galatians 6:10 tells us "whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone — *especially to those in the family of faith.*"

A lot of people want to reject the tidal wave of scriptural support that bears this truth out. The true manifest of Christianity...of who one *really* is, is "lateral." A sideways faith and love. 1 John 4 and 5 gives us this stark view: "*If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their Christian brothers and sisters. Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God. And everyone who loves the Father loves his children, too.*" Clearly there is no way to dance out of this "smoking gun." Adhering to these passages and the plethora of others which equally supports the point, leaves us with no other conclusion than to acknowledge that there are a lot of people praying this morning with no one on the other end of the phone.

In Isaiah 1:15 God Himself speaks on this issue, saying "*When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look. Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims.*" Psalms 66:18 chimes in, saying "*If I had harbored sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.*" Clearly we cannot expect to just be a "vertical" Christian while washing our hands of our horizontal sins against the people around us. John has told us that "*Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.*" Thus it is no leap to understand that your *lack* of love and your unrepented *sins against those around you*, prove to the world...*that you are not.*

If you put 1 Thessalonians 1:3 next to 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10, You will get the picture: The person who claims to be one of God's "called out one's", but whose life has not changed...whose Christianity is not reflecting horizontal toward his brother, is only fooling himself. He or she is the villain in the account wherein Jesus says to them...*despite a plethora of church and religious activities*, that He "does not know them," and they are condemned to "depart from Him" to a place absent of Him wherein there will be "weeping and is gnashing of teeth." Those whom God chooses, He changes. He changes them to be like Him. This does not mean they are perfect, but they are possessors of a new life that cannot be hidden...and certainly *won't* be!

2:7

Paul says he was "gentle among them." His interaction with these believers was that of a mother or a parent. Certainly we know from other writings that Paul on other occasions had reason to discipline and correct. But his heart was always that of a mother. He was able in this case to interact with this church with grace and a gentle spirit because *their* hearts were righteous and responsive.

However this is a difficult sell in our day, as self discipline and social/cultural discipline is all but extinct. Telling someone "no" is in our day a "micro-aggression" and a repression of my rights and identity. However,

Paul says he is parental in nature and that is reflective of the *biblical* picture of a parent, not the 2023 version. Loving, supportive, corrective, and disciplining. This was...and according to scripture *still is*, the BIBLICAL definition of love.

Paul did not lift himself up as the boss when dealing with other believers. Nor did he speak down to them. Yet he did have some authority, and therefore the Thessalonians accepted the gospel like children who desired the tender, loving care that Paul provided. They did not buck the relationship, nor the responsibility for each other, but responded to it.

Again, we know that Paul indeed was a man of authority, but he always used his authority in love, not to rule over. Like a parent, Paul imparted his own life in the care of the flock. He was invested and committed. His was not a “do as I say not as I do” leadership. He had poured himself out like a drink offering on their behalf. (Philippians 2:17) He told the Corinthian church that he would “*very gladly spend and be spent for their souls.*” (2 Cor 12:15) This kind of living can be costly and often painful, but there is no other righteous way to minister. It was the ministry model that Christ Himself gave us, and the same that he expects us to manifest to each other!

John MacArthur comments on this passage as follows:

“As the phrase *her own children* indicates, Paul was no paid surrogate mother or modern-style, hired day care worker. The apostle exhibited the same feelings as a nursing mother when he cared for the Thessalonians’ spiritual needs. This picture is usually foreign to all leaders outside the true church of Jesus Christ. In fact, for most, it would appear to be sentimental, weak, and unproductive. The standard for worldly leadership is to accomplish the leader’s desires through people. In the church, pastors have the privilege of seeing things God desires done in people. That changes the dynamic. As good parents are concerned about their children’s hearts, so are good pastors. The preceding metaphors make that clear.”

2:8-9

Jesus recognized the need...the demand, upon a pastor to be invested. John 10:12-13 "*But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep.*” Paul was no hireling.

Again, to operate in such a manner...with your heart on your sleeve, places you in a position to be hurt. So if you desire the job of a spiritual leader, then you best brace yourself. Some confessing individuals will put a knife in your back, but thankfully there will be some who will love you like a brother and be the best friends a person could ask for. The Word of God overflows in clarity as to which of these are true reborn children of God, and which are merely religious facades seeking eternal life but not eternal change.

The one aspect of the faith that is so crucial and yet so often absent is our love for each other. A love that is not just in word but deed. And real love costs something. If God is truly in our presence then so is a manifest love for Him *and each other*. Not just when it is easy and comfortable, but even when it is difficult and costly.

Herein is another scriptural example of the call to ‘labor and toil’ ...something that we want to think should never enter into the Christian faith. Paul was not looking for a free ride. He did whatever was necessary in order to be able to minister...in order to bless the people who he loved.

2:10

Paul reminds them again of the life they saw him leading. It wasn’t just words...but a lifestyle.

Please note that Paul wasn't denying he was an imperfect sinner. And certainly, I'm not either. He acknowledged his shortcomings on a several scriptural occasions. In fact, he once claimed to be the 'chief of sinners!' But overall, if verse 10 was not true, it would have been an easy rebuttal. But Paul exercised every opportunity to live out his love and faith as well as teaching it. He was a pastor as well as a preacher!

Paul was proclaiming *and living* the power of God, not just an intellectual position. This letter wasn't a 'valentine.' It was an exhortation for and even a record of love being lived out within a body of Christ. He wasn't just claiming that *they* knew Paul's "street cred" but He said God knew it too. And that is critical, because we can often 'put on' for others, but we can't 'pull the wool over God's eyes.' Our lives and ministries do not begin and end on Sundays...we are to love each other in community...all week long.

2:11-12

Paul is a quintessential model for all who serve the Lord. We are to be nursing mothers who aren't angry with the demands and cries of our children, like brothers who are working together and relating to one another, like fathers who are not afraid to speak the truth.

Notice that Paul's love was not just declared in an emotional way. He *exhorted*...which means "strong encouragement and warning," he *comforted*, and he went so far as to *charge them* to walk righteously in Christ. The word "charge" means to witness or to "testify" and is actually where we get the word "martyr." Thus this "charge" would have to be actually lived out in the flesh.

Paul calls upon them, *and us*, to "walk worthy of God's call." That strikes me. Do any of us actually think about that? The concept of "walking worthy" of God's call upon us? Now we need to realize that the truth of the matter is, we are never "worthy" of God's love nor His salvation. But do we have the heart to be the best we can be? Do we respond in kind to His love and seek to be like Him? Are we willing to be uncomfortable...even *suffer* in order to fulfill that call?

George MacDonald wrote that...*"God will help us when we cannot walk, and He will help us when we find it hard to walk, but He cannot help us if we will not walk."*

"Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

Romans 6:4

"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called..." Ephesians 4:1

J Vernon McGee adds the practical comment that

"Walking is not a balloon ascension. A great many people think the Christian life is some great, overwhelming experience and you take off like a rocket going out into space. That's not where you live the Christian life. Rather, it is in your home, in your office, in the schoolroom, on the street. The way you get around in this life is to walk. You are to walk in Christ. God grant that you and I might be joined to Him in our daily walk." This walk is not so much about being somewhere, or achieving some level of holiness. It's about the journey. It's about moving forward.

2:13

Paul thanked God constantly for these believers. I can relate, as you all are something I thank God for constantly: your support and love for me. I always wonder who else would have me! This matter was something that held great value to Paul! He wasn't about to forget.

“When your ears received God’s message...” Paul had come to understand that the people didn’t hear his words as his own. They took them as if they were coming from God’s very mouth. That was no doubt a daunting thing for Paul, and it was probably scary at times for the people to trust Paul that way too. This is not a matter of people blindly accepting what came out of his mouth. We have all been called to hold our pastor/teachers to the written Word of God. But this is the way it ought to be in truth. We should be able to trust those who lead us. Or do we come and sit down to critic the message each week?

There should come a time when we have learned to hear and receive our pastor’s words unless he is off the path of scripture. But the fact is, most of us are skeptical and reluctant. We are willing to hear him, until he steps on our toes or speaks against our pet sin.

Ask yourself; is what I’m teaching from this pulpit “effectively working in you?” When you receive it and live it, does it change you? Does it work in you as it promises? Does it hold up under the scrutiny of the Word? If so, do you have the courage to receive it as the word of God? The Thessalonians were brave enough, mature enough, to receive it. But are you?

2:14-16

Spurgeon calls our attention to these...

“...new converts exhibiting the family likeness, turning out to be very like the believers of older churches. Born many miles away from Judaea, with a sea dividing them from the first country where the gospel was preached, yet these Thessalonian Gentiles, when converted, looked wonderfully like the converts from among the Jews.”

The believers became “imitators” of those who had come before them. They experienced the same “birth pangs”...the fears no doubt, as well as the persecutions. *“And the one on whom seed (the Word of God) was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. And those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away.”* (Mt 13:20-21, Luke 8:13)

Persecution for Christ's sake did not cause the Thessalonians to fall away. In fact, they didn’t just survive, they thrived. They heard the word, received it, and the power of God was made manifest in their lives and fellowship. They held each other up and encouraged each other in the walk of faith. No one was going to be allowed to take away what they had. They saw what they wanted to be in the earlier converts. They saw what they wanted to be in Paul. And they went out, by the power of God, and became such themselves. Because they...*because you*, are the living power of God. You are the living breathing gospel.

2:17-20

This is what Paul had been addressing. The power of God in the living of the believer. Paul’s hope, his joy, his crown of rejoicing was the believers there in Thessalonica. For Paul...they were his paycheck. They were his reward. Just as you all are for me. Just as we all are to each other.

Ever wonder what kept Paul going through all he endured? What kept him coming back for more? What made him so tenacious? So committed...so faithful? **You.** *You are.* The Thessalonians and all of us that have “imitated” them... All those who have followed in their footsteps. All those who dared to live their faith sideways as well as vertical.

The poet Robert Frost once said, “I’m not a teacher, I’m an awakener.”

This was Paul. This is the heart of a pastor. And that is my heart toward all of you...