

THE FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

I. In Mark #10 beginning in v. 43 Jesus told His disciples, "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Thus, Jesus set the standard for the approach to life that is to be observed by His followers. It is a standard that should be applied to church leaders, church members, parents and leaders in the community.

A couple of months ago one of my brothers in Wisconsin called just before he was going off to a church board meeting where they were considering a possible candidate to be pastor of his church. He wanted my opinion about a man they were considering who was a good speaker and preacher but who did not like to get very personally involved with people. I was not around. So Suzy told him what she thought that I would say. This potential candidate might not be a very good pastor if he had difficulty in getting involved with people. That is pretty much what I would have said.

The Apostle Paul, as well as Jesus, pointed out that it was important for all Christians to be involved in the lives of others. In 2 Corinthians #5 vv. 18 & 19 Paul addressed fellow believers, saying, "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation--- not just Paul and his fellow apostles, but all believers--- that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation."

In the fourth century the Roman emperor Constantine became a follower of Jesus and stopped the persecution of Christians. A couple of emperors later, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The

state and the church, which had previously been at odds with one another, now found themselves joining together. This alliance helped to encourage the development of a clerical class of Christians. For some, becoming a church official was a goal in itself.

Commenting on the status of bishops in Rome, an early church leader describes them as "free from money worries, enriched by offerings from married women, riding in carriages, dressing splendidly, feasting luxuriantly--- their banquets are better than imperial ones."

The ministry of reconciliation committed to all Christians soon came to be claimed by the clergy. Historian Paul Johnson writes, "A bishop could remit sins, or not, only as an authorized, appointed, and officially ordained person. Soon the privilege, dependent on office, could be extended to all ordained clergy. Then the cleavage between clergy and laity became complete, and the Church was divided between rulers and ruled." (*History of Christianity*, p. 81)

The original intent of the head of the church was that all Christians should be ministers. Still today in the evangelical church we need to be reminded of that. We need to remember that in our involvement in the church, in the family, in the workplace and in the community. The need for servant leadership is stressed in 1 Thessalonians, which we have begun to study. The church there was not a perfect church. But it was a healthy church, and Paul described it as a model for other churches to emulate. We want to see what we can learn from it, and from what Paul says in his letter to it.

We have seen that Paul and Silas and Timothy came to Thessalonica in Greece on their second missionary journey. They were there for only a short time, but they managed to start a church.

Some months later Paul was at Corinth, further down the coast, when he got a report from Timothy about how the church in Thessalonica was doing. It was a positive report. This prompted Paul to send this letter to the

church there. We saw last time that the key to the church's health was its faith, its love and its hope.

Now in #2 the focus shifts to the approach that Paul and his cohorts used in coming to Thessalonica. In doing so he provides us with a model for healthy leadership. All of us who are Christians have been called by God to serve as ministers, to share the gospel and to meet needs--- in our family, our church, our neighborhood, our workplace and our community. Let's look at the key ingredients that are essential for this healthy leadership.

II. First, in vv. 1 & 2 of 1 Thessalonians #2, we find that **HEALTHY LEADERS IN A HEALTHY CHURCH WILL DISPLAY BOLDNESS**. Paul begins by making a defense of his ministry among the Thessalonians. Back in this time and in this part of the world there were no rock music stars or TV celebrities or movie legends to write about in gossip columns. But there were orators who would travel around and look for speaking opportunities in these larger towns. Some of them achieved celebrity status.

Often these speakers were called "sophists," which literally means "wise guys." If your potters' union was holding a big social event down at the temple to the patron goddess of potters, they might well spend big money to bring in a sophist to have a nice speech from a famous speaker. Some sophists might tend to push a patriotic theme. Some might tend to have a religious bent. Many were just trying to make money and become famous.

Paul and his missionary friends Timothy and Silas had been forced out of town in Thessalonica because their bold preaching produced a strong, negative response from the Jewish community. The Christian leaders had not been back to Thessalonica. New Christians had been added to the congregation in the meantime. Some perhaps had not known Paul. So Paul in #2 is giving a defense of his ministry among the Thessalonians. He is assuring his readers that he is not like these sophist characters who travelled around and often were primarily interested in their own fame and fortune.

So in v. 1 he writes, "For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain." We saw last time that most of the congregation was comprised of Gentiles, and Paul had been trained as a Pharisee to hate Gentiles. He had racist training that Jews were better than everyone else. But now as a result of his Christian transformation, he had come to love Gentiles. Here he calls them "brothers," because of their common Christian faith. He says that his ministry among them was not "in vain." The Christian missionaries were men of integrity, and they saw good results among the Thessalonians.

In v. 2 he adds, "But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict."--- in Greek the word is *agoni*, from which we get the English "agony."

Prior to coming to Thessalonica, the missionaries had made their first stop in Europe at Philippi. According to Acts #16, they healed a servant girl who had been demon possessed. The master of this girl had been making money from her ability to tell fortunes, and he got upset by this exorcism. So he stirred up rabble rousers and had Paul and Silas hauled before the civil authorities. The two Christians were beaten and thrown into jail. During the night, there was an earthquake, and God freed them from their chains. They proceeded to preach to the jailer and ended up baptizing him and his family.

Because Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, their legal rights were violated when they were beaten by the civil authorities without a trial. The city leaders had not bothered to find out about their citizenship status, and they could have been in big trouble. So Paul demanded that they come in person and apologize for their actions. They did, and they pleaded with the two of them to leave the city, which they did. Thessalonica was their next stop.

So Paul and Silas showed up in Thessalonica battered and bruised. They had suffered and been mistreated at their last stop. We might have

expected them to take a break. At least they might have taken a low profile for a while. But they went straight to the synagogue on the next Sabbath and started preaching again.

Paul calls this response "boldness." Literally the Greek term means "all speech." The idea has to do with freedom and boldness of speech. These guys spoke out freely. Given the fact that they had just been beaten up for speaking freely in Philippi, this boldness was not normal. The key factor here is that it was "boldness in our God." There was a divine strength at work here.

This boldness was a model for the Thessalonian Christians. This example helped them to become a healthy church and to model boldness to others. Thus in # 1 v. 8 we read, "For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia--- the two Roman provinces that comprised Greece, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything."

It is often in the midst of opposition and trials that we have the best opportunities to be bold in sharing the gospel. When my father was on his deathbed in an ICU unit a little over fifteen years ago, it was a difficult time. My brothers and I took turns watching over him for about ten days or so. But there were these opportunities that were just thrust in our face. Kids that we had grown up with had their mother in the ICU unit. We got to talk to them about spiritual things. Other people who had loved ones in ICU found out that I was a pastor and were asking me to pray. There were opportunities to talk about Jesus. We had a funeral for our dad, and a lot of people from the community showed up. Each of us four boys had an opportunity to talk about our dad and his faith in Christ.

We may not all have the naturally bold personality of an Apostle Paul, but we can all trust God to step a little out of our comfort zone when we encounter opportunities to witness, especially in the midst of difficult times.

III. In vv. 3-6 we are told that HEALTHY LEADERS IN A HEALTHY CHURCH WILL DISPLAY INTEGRITY. The boldness of Paul and Timothy and Silas and the work of God resulted in a church in Thessalonica. Opposition to this Jesus movement was initially led by Jews in the synagogue. Paul was forced out of town. Opposition to the church that continued to grow in numbers did not stop.

Probably some of the opponents tried to put Paul and his companion into the category of sophists, who were only interested in themselves. A philosopher by the name of Dio Chrysostom, who lived in the time of Paul, spoke out against such travelling speakers who would roll into town "with a view to their own profit and reputation, and not to improve you." The critics may have pointed out that the Christian leaders were Jews and foreigners who were seeking to destroy Greek and Roman culture.

So Paul begins in v. 3 to talk about the integrity of his message and his motives: "For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive..." First, he claims that there was no error in their message. The message of the gospel corresponds to reality. This is the way that things are. Jewish Christians can be confident that the message about the Messiah is consistent with, and a fulfillment of, the Hebrew Scriptures.

Second, he says that there was no "impurity" in their presentation. The original Greek word usually had a connotation of sexual impurity. Here it may have a broader connotation that includes any kind of impure motive. These Christians were not out for women or for money. They were out to tell people about the true God.

Third, Paul denied that he was guilty of deceit. There were tricksters about in the Roman Empire who were in pursuit of fame or money or power or women. Some of these same hucksters are still around today. Too many of them are on what is supposedly Christian TV. I saw one program a while ago where viewers were promised that if they sent in a check for \$100, they would be provided with an answer to any question that they might have

from someone who had the gift of prophecy. What a farce! Can you picture Jesus blessing something like that?

Paul continues in v. 4, "...but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts." The word for "approved" means "tested, with a view to approval." It is the kind of testing that GM does when it is testing one of its own cars. The testing may be rigorous, but the hope and goal of GM is that the car will pass the test.

God's testing of Paul and his friends has the goal in mind of having them preach the gospel. It is God whom they serve, not primarily other people. So it is God whom they need to please, rather than people. This focus keeps them from being tempted to water down the gospel.

The challenge when all of us are involved in reaching unbelievers is not to soften the truth. When we are working with people, we face a natural temptation to please them. People want our approval. At times, they want us to soften our view of sin. They want us to say that it is OK to get drunk once in a while, to lie a little on our taxes, to get even with the person who wronged us, to live together with this person of the opposite sex--- or the same sex, to have an abortion, or whatever. But integrity in ministry means telling the truth about God, about heaven and hell, not just about having the right methods and good intentions.

In v. 5 the apostle says, "For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed--- God is witness." Dale Carnegie says that "flattery is telling the other person precisely what he thinks about himself." It is lulling people into a sense of security with the purpose of getting our own way. The flattering speech that Paul had in mind was perhaps the speech of at least some of the sophists who were seeking to gain money or fame or political support from the masses. It is the kind of speech that we hear from some politicians who make promises that they do not intend to keep.

Paul and Silas did not speak like this. The gospel requires some hard talk. It says that people are not basically good and wonderful. It says that they are selfish sinners who are in need of a Savior. It says that we are made in the image of God, but we are seriously fallen. In fact, left to ourselves, we will end up in hell. Fortunately, the gospel also says that we can be rescued from this predicament. But there is only one way out. We must trust in Jesus, the God-man who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins.

Paul also denies that he and his friends came with a pretext for greed. They did not come to Thessalonica like others may have done who wanted power or money. We have to watch out for such types today.

In v. 6 Paul adds, "Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ." Their motive in coming and preaching at Thessalonica was not to get glory and honor from people. They did get respect from those who became Christians, but that was not their primary motive.

Also in coming to Thessalonica Paul could have appealed to his position as an apostle and demanded respect and honor because of that. He and his missionary colleagues could have requested financial support from the people whom they served. But that was not the approach that they took. They had an attitude of humility. Their lives were marked by integrity.

Integrity also marked the life of Lothar Kreyssig. Kreyssig became a judge in Germany in 1928. In 1934 he became a member of the Confessing Church, an evangelical church group which stood up against Hitler and the Nazis. A year later Lothar Kreyssig became an official of that church organization. Part of his judicial responsibilities included overseeing several hundred mentally retarded children and adults. When an unusual number of death certificates for these people crossed his desk, he investigated. He found out that they were intentionally being killed as a result of a Nazi program. He filed charges against a Nazi official responsible for these killings and filed an injunction prohibiting these retarded people from being taken away from these institutions.

The Minister of Justice called in Kreyssig and showed him a letter from Adolf Hitler authorizing this euthanasia program. Kreyssig replied, "The fuhrer's word does not create a right." For some reason, that response did not go over very well in the Nazi government. Kreyssig was fired. The Gestapo wanted to send him to a concentration camp. Hitler allowed him to retire to his farm. There he hid Jewish women from the Nazis. He survived the war and devoted most of the rest of his life to church work. This evangelical Christian was the only German judge to stand up against the Nazis. He was truly a man of integrity. Healthy leaders in a healthy church will always display integrity.

IV. HEALTHY LEADERS IN A HEALTHY CHURCH WILL also DISPLAY MOTHERLY LOVE. That is the message of vv. 7-10. Paul writes in v. 7, "But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children."

If you have a study Bible, you may notice that there is a translation difficulty in v. 7. Some of the early Greek manuscripts have a word that begins with what we would call the letter "n." Others have a word with the same spelling without the beginning "n." It is a question of whether Paul said that they were "gentle," or were "babes," among them. Scholars are divided about which was the original word. In either case the point seems to be that Paul and Silas and Timothy were gentle with these new Christians.

Furthermore, they were like nursing mothers. The term here is rare. The reference is probably to wet nurses, women who were paid to nurse the babies of other women. If they loved the babies of other mothers, how much more they loved their own babies. The new Christians at Thessalonica were like babies. Most of them were from pagan Gentile backgrounds. There was no New Testament yet. They did not know the Old Testament at all. Many of them had wild backgrounds. They were clueless about how to live the Christian life. So they were dependent upon these Christian missionaries.

Paul and his friends realized this. So they were patient and gentle and loving toward them. They were a model to us of how we should treat new Christians in a healthy church. New Christians are often like babies. They make messes. They can't walk or live the Christian life on their own. We who have been Christians for a while need to be patient and loving and kind toward them. We need to display a motherly love.

Paul continues in v. 8, "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us." These guys did not just show up for church and Bible study and leave right afterwards. They hung around. They spent individual time with the new believers. They truly cared. They invested their lives in these new Christians. They are an example to us of our need to get involved with fellow believers, especially new Christians. Perhaps that means hanging around with them after church or Bible study. Perhaps it means getting together with them during the week.

The author adds in v. 9, "For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God." Paul and Silas and Timothy apparently did not have 401ks that they could dip into to sustain themselves. But they did not plead for financial help. They did not sell prayer handkerchiefs or holy water. They did not even pass the offering plate around.

When they ran low on funds, they went to work, and they worked hard. According to Acts #18, the Apostle Paul was a tentmaker, or a leather worker, by trade. At Thessalonica he worked on the side to supplement his income. Imagine, the great Apostle Paul, the author of much of the New Testament, the leader of the outreach to the Gentiles in the Roman Empire, had to work a second job to make ends meet. That doesn't seem right, does it? Wasn't his time too valuable to spend in making tents or wallets or belts or whatever? Wouldn't a time management expert say that he had wrong priorities?

Yet that is what the Apostle to the Gentiles did. He did not want to be a financial burden to these new Christians. Perhaps he wanted to go out of his way to avoid being associated with the traveling charlatans who came around trying to get money and fame from people by using their public speaking abilities. Elsewhere Paul wrote that Christian workers have a right to be paid by Christians for their work among them, but he chose not to claim that right at Thessalonica.

In my previous church at a couple of points I painted houses and cared for a retired Jewish dentist. Robert Kenneston from our congregation did a similar thing for a number of years. He and Joann went up to Rachel, Nevada, each Sunday and pastored the only church in about a fifty mile radius. Because it was a small congregation, he got his income working as a tradesman like the Apostle Paul.

The example of Paul was a great model for the Greek Gentiles. The Greek view going back to Plato and most of the other philosophers was that manual labor was demeaning. It was work appropriate for slaves and the lower classes. Plato asked, "How can a man be happy if he is a slave to anybody at all?" (Gorgias, 491e)

That was not the attitude of Jesus, who said that He came to serve, not to be served. That was not the traditional view of the Jews, either. They taught that every father was responsible to teach his son a trade. Even the rabbis were expected to have a trade. A famous rabbi by the name of Gamaliel III, who lived 150 years after the time of Paul, wrote, "But all study of the Law without (worldly) labor comes to naught at the last and brings sin in its train." (M. Aboth 2.2) So the example of Paul in the practice of his trade was a great lesson for these young Greek Christians about the value of work.

Then in v. 10 Paul says, "You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers." These Thessalonian Christians saw with their own eyes how Paul and Silas and Timothy behaved in a situation of and opposition. They showed a genuine motherly love toward these people who responded to the gospel. It was a

great example to them, and it is a great example to us today. In our involvement with fellow Christians we are responsible to display motherly love.

V. Finally, in vv. 11-12, we find that **HEALTHY LEADERS IN A HEALTHY CHURCH WILL DISPLAY FATHERLY DIRECTION**. Paul in the first century recognized a truth that many moderns fail to grasp. The best child raising situation involves a mom and a dad. There are unique traits in each gender that combine to make a positive contribution to the raising of children.

Here Paul says in v. 11, continuing into v. 12, "For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you..." The Greek word for the first verb in this clause has a positive connotation. It has to do with encouragement. The second verb was used by the Greeks to refer to comforting. The idea had to do with cheering up and inspiring toward correct behavior. The third term has to do with earnest entreaty. It involves a solemn charge. After these spiritual babies at Thessalonica got on their feet, Paul gave them fatherly direction.

Notice how this fatherly direction was made to "each one of you." Paul spent individual time with these new Christians. Maybe some came by his tent shop. Maybe he visited them in their homes or in their workplaces.

The objective of this ministry is identified in v. 12. This is done so that you will "walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory." The goal is spiritual maturity. Good Christian parents want their children to become more independent of them and more dependent on the Lord. That is what Paul and Silas and Timothy wanted to develop in the Christians at Thessalonica. They wanted to prepare them for God's kingdom.

There are different aspects of God's kingdom. There is one sense in which Christ is ruling in the hearts of Christians at the present time. But there is also a future aspect of God's kingdom that will involve Christ ruling

physically as king upon the earth. It is this latter aspect that seems to be the emphasis here. For Paul makes a number of references to this Second Coming of Christ in this letter which will inaugurate this earthly kingdom.

This coming of the kingdom to earth will also be characterized as a time of glory. In Romans #5 v. 2 Paul writes, "...we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

The time of Christ's return is characterized as a time of glory. In Romans #8 v. 18 he says, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." The apostle relates this glory to the return of Christ.

Notice again that we have in this passage the presence of faith, love and hope. The model ministry of Paul and his friends has as its objective a worthy walk that looks forward to the return of Christ. That is hope. Love for new Christians involves motherly love and fatherly direction. Love for God produces integrity. Love for the lost produces witnessing. Faith leads to boldness, even in the face of opposition.

Notice also that a healthy ministry is a balanced ministry. It is balanced in that there is a concern for fellow Christians and for unbelievers. Boldness in our passage relates especially to the proclamation of the gospel to unbelievers. Integrity has value both to unbelievers and to fellow Christians. Motherly love and fatherly direction involve fellow believers.

This is the ministry of service to which we are all called. Elton Trueblood writes, "Christianity withers when it is a spectator sport. A layman in medicine is one who cannot practice. The same with law. But there is no place in the Christian faith for those who cannot, or will not practice. There are no passengers on the ship of Christ. All are members of the crew." Jesus said, "Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."