

Paul's Ministry and Example: 1 Thess. 2:1-16

Background: In 1 Thess. 2:1-16 Paul reminds the Thessalonian Christians about his first days with them. He had arrived in Thessalonica after being beaten and imprisoned in Philippi. Then he was badly treated in Thessalonica, too. Some unbelieving Jews used their influence with the city leaders to persecute him and his new converts and then to chase him out of town. Having left them after only a few weeks or months, Paul was so worried about these new converts that he sent Timothy to check on them. When Timothy returned to Paul, Paul was pleased with their perseverance and wrote this letter to further encourage them in the face of persecution and to answer a few of their questions.

Text: In 2:1-12 Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians that his motives were entirely pure, that all of his efforts were for their benefit in light of the gospel. He was not after their praise or money; he was not trying simply to gain a following; nor was he seeking the easy life of the intellectual. In fact, his only motive was to please the God who had called him to be an apostle. He further reminds them that he could have asserted his authority as an apostle (2:6), probably meaning that he had the right to demand that they supply his food and housing (see 2 Thess. 3:7-9; 1 Cor. 9:3-6, 15-18). However, instead of being demanding and domineering, Paul writes that he was “gentle” with them (some Greek manuscripts have a slightly different Greek word translated “like young children” in the TNIV). In fact, rather than have the church care for him and his companions, Paul emphasizes that he cared for them “like a nursing mother cares for her children.” He reminds them that he worked (presumably making tents) and supported himself so as not to burden them (2:7-8). Finally, he shifts metaphors and compares himself to a loving father who encourages, comforts, and urges his children to live as they should (2:11-12).

The section is really not hard to understand (although it is very difficult to put into practice). It is all about truth-telling, transparency, integrity, pure motives, love, and gentleness in ministry. But it does raise an interesting question. Why does Paul go on and on about the purity of his motives? Why does he feel the need to set the record straight? Was someone there attacking him, questioning his sincerity? Did he simply feel the need to defend himself, since there were so many charlatans among the philosophers in the cities of the ancient world? A skeptic might even think that he “protesteth a bit too much.” Most of us have known those who have spoken loudly against that of which they were most guilty. Why did Paul feel the need to remind them of how well he had treated them?

To answer the question requires some understanding of philosophy in the ancient world. In some ways Paul's competitors were actually the philosophers, not the religious people. Ancient religions did not call on people to be better people and to live a certain way—Greek and Roman religions taught people to appease the gods of the sea, the storm, the countryside, childbirth, various cities, etc. In other words, they were not concerned with ethics. Morals were the concern of the philosophers. Philosophers were the ones who told people to live according to reason rather than passion (Stoicism), to live a quiet life surrounded by friends and pleasure (Epicureans), to live in accordance with nature rather than human customs (Cynicism), etc. And unfortunately, many philosophers had found a way to make a good living out of going from town to town speaking in the public square and gaining adherents who would house and feed them for a few days or weeks, an easy living by ancient standards. Paul may have been distancing himself from these traveling philosophers, reminding his readers that they knew well that he had acted out of sincerity and love. This was not an unusual topic among philosophers during Paul's day. People in the first century would not have thought this chapter to be self-promoting, as modern readers might. At the same time, Paul's motivation for this section probably goes beyond separating himself from charlatans. He most likely intends to offer himself as an example worthy of imitation, as he often says explicitly (see 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9; 1 Cor. 4:16, 11:1; Phil. 3:17). Just as he acts sincerely and unselfishly in imitation of God, so should they. This theme will reappear later in the letter.

2:13-16 is problematic. It is not terribly difficult to understand, but many have read it as anti-Semitic. Paul begins the section by continuing his thanksgiving (begun in 1:2) for the way that the Thessalonians received the gospel. They recognized it as being from God and therefore were willing to believe it even in the face of persecution from their countrymen (2:13). No problem yet. However, verses 14-16 compare them to the Christians in Judea (Jerusalem) who

“suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone ... and heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.” (Incidentally, the reference to the “wrath of God coming upon them at last” may refer to various persecutions of Jews that were taking place in Judea and elsewhere by the hands of Roman governors and others. For example, thousands of Jews were slaughtered at the Passover in AD 49 or 50 by the Judean governor Cumanus. This same governor also arrested and sent the high priest and other leaders to Rome during this time.)

On the one hand, what Paul writes was absolutely true of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem and elsewhere during several decades of the first century. They did reject and kill Jesus, and they persecuted his followers in numerous ways. Paul believes that they deserve the wrath that God was bringing upon them. On the other hand, we must not read this as a wholesale condemnation of Jewish people, as too many Christians have done for centuries (leading to such atrocities as the Holocaust). There are several things to keep in mind. 1) The persecution was carried out by only *some* of the Jewish *leaders*, and that was almost 2,000 years ago. This is not a condemnation of all Jews even at the time of Paul, much less of all time. 2) Paul and the majority of Christians in the first three decades of Christianity still considered themselves Jewish (the true Israel). They had not given up being Jews just because the Jewish Messiah had arrived. The difficult language of these verses and many others in the New Testament should probably be read as a part of a heated *dialogue among Jews* who had different beliefs in the first century. 3) Christians have also been guilty of persecuting their opponents through the centuries, even though Jesus calls on us to love our enemies. Should all Christians of all times be vilified because of the actions of some in the past? There are numerous other considerations in this discussion, but perhaps this is enough to get the discussion started.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you react when a preacher or politician or CEO (or anyone else) makes a speech in which he or she makes strong claims about their honesty, their pure motives, and their lack of greed and hunger for power? Why do you think Paul spilled so much ink defending his ministry? Notice that he even uses near-oaths twice in this section—verses 5 & 10. (I have suggested some possible answers to this, but there are others.)
2. Think of the characteristics of an effective minister, either someone you have known or an ideal minister in your mind. You may even want to make a list of such characteristics. How do they stack up against Paul’s claims in this section of 1 Thessalonians?
3. Why do you think Paul chose to support himself doing manual labor, if he had every right to be supported by the church?
4. Many of us would be hesitant to speak of ourselves as “holy, righteous, and blameless,” as Paul does in 2:10. Why is that? Is it Paul’s problem or ours (or neither)?
5. Paul mentions suffering in this chapter (2:2, 14), just as he did in 1:6. Paul and other New Testament writers seem to suggest that suffering is to be expected in the Christian life. Is suffering good for the church (and individual Christians) or bad for it?
6. Paul writes about Jews in terms that appear harsh to our culture (2:14-16). Is Paul anti-Semitic? How should today’s Christians deal with the anti-Semitism that many Christians have fostered through the centuries?