

A Passion to Please the Lord (Part 2) (1 Thessalonians 2:1-12)

Matthew Williams

We're a couple weeks into a sermon series from 1 Thessalonians called "Living With the End in View." It's a letter written to help us live in light of the end of the story – not just the story of our life, but the story of the entire human race.

The end of our story isn't the cataclysmic vengeance of climate change, a World War III, or an alien invasion. It's not even a mystery. It's known, it's clear, because we're part of God's great big story and he has already revealed what happens in the final chapter. He created us in the beginning and he will hold us accountable in the end. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, will return to judge the living and the dead.

Living in light of that end STARTS with choosing to follow the only One who can deliver us in the end. It starts with conversion, turning away from idols – the false gods that we think will deliver us – to trust and wait for Jesus "who delivers us from the wrath to come." Paul and his companions are confident the Holy Spirit has already worked that miracle in the Thessalonian's hearts. They made the critical turn. They believed the word of the gospel, the good news of all Jesus has done to save us from sin and death, and turned away from sin to follow Jesus in the midst of tremendous suffering.

As the primary author, Paul overflows with thanksgiving to God for the work he's done in their lives. He also reminds the Thessalonians that God uses means to draw sinners to himself, faithful men and women (like Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy) who are willing to SPEAK the truth of the gospel with their words and ADORN the truth of the gospel with their deeds. So he transitions in Ch. 2 from recounting the joy of their conversion to defending the record and integrity of his ministry.

1 Thess 2:1-12 is all about how Paul and his companions related to the Thessalonians – the character of their ministry – as they helped the Thessalonians learn to live with the end in view. The set-up is straightforward. "Alright, Thessalonians. We want you to think about something. Why do you think we were SO bold, so courageous, so persistent in telling you about Jesus IN THE MIDST of all kinds of persecution from people who hated what we were doing and eventually forced us to leave? What kept us going in the hard work of Christian ministry?"

The answer in 1 Thess 2:4 is the same thing that will empower us to persevere in following Jesus and doing what's right in the midst of a hard relationship today.

Endurance *in* the work of ministry is sustained by a supreme desire to please the Lord *through* our ministry. 1 Thess 2:4, "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."

Your motivation matters. If you want to persevere in doing what's right, you have to do it for the right reasons. Pleasing God is the right reason. That's the point of v. 4. But let's be honest. Our motives are mixed. It's hard to know exactly why we do what we do. How can I know for sure whether I'm pleasing man in this relationship or pleasing God? Look at the fruit! The character OF our ministry reveals the motivation FOR our ministry.

Vv. 5-6 describe the character of a man-pleasing ministry that will not endure hardship. We lingered there last week. Vv. 7-12 describe the kind of God-pleasing ministry that will endure hardship. We'll focus there today. Remember the big principle - endurance *in* the work of ministry is sustained by a supreme desire to please the Lord *through* our ministry. So what are the characteristics of the kind of gospel ministry, a way of relating to other people, that pleases the Lord?

1) WE PLEASE GOD BY RELATING TO PEOPLE LIKE A GOOD MOTHER

V. 7, "But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children."

One of the most striking things in this passage is the way Paul, as a man, freely describes his ministry in terms of what a woman does. He isn't signaling that gender roles are interchangeable. The very fact that he appeals to the example of a "nursing mother" as an illustration of one set of qualities and a "father" as an illustration of a different set of qualities presumes the existence of (1) unique, God-given roles for men and women (2) unique God-given abilities necessary to fulfill their roles.

At the same time, however, he avoids the opposite danger of gender stereotyping. "Well, we all know if you skin your knee and need some compassion, run to mom. But you're going off the rails and need someone to set you straight and help you figure out what to do with your life, just talk to dad." No. He never says mothers should not exhort and instruct OR fathers should not be gentle and affectionate.

He simply says there are some qualities a good mother exemplifies in a unique way AND some qualities a good father exemplifies in a unique way that we should ALL learn from and emulate in our relationships with one another. Why? Because both a good mother in her unique role and a good father in his unique role reflect the character of God himself. Isa 66:13, "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." Ps 103:13, "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him."

What can we learn about the kind of Christian ministry that pleases the Lord from a nursing mother? I think there are at least 3 categories in vv. 7-9. First, the kind of ministry that pleases the Lord is...

A) Gentle

A baby humpback whale starts learning to swim within minutes of birth. A baby deer can stand in 10 minutes and walk in 7 hours. A human infant is different. They can't swim, stand, or walk. They can't find food for themselves. They are completely helpless and dependent for months. They require careful supervision and tender care in order to survive. You have to hold them. Clothe them. Change them. Feed them. Burp them. Teach them to sleep. Sensitivity isn't optional. It's mandatory.

My wife, Aliza, has always been a compassionate woman, but I had never seen such tenderness up close and personal until I watched her care for our three boys during the early months of their life. Her gentleness toward them wasn't weak. It was strong. It was beautiful. It provided a vivid picture of the Lord's heart to gently care for me in my own troubles and sorrows.

If you are a Christian, whether you are a man or a woman, the same kind of gentleness should be visibly present in the way you relate to people around you. It's not a personality thing. It's not cultivating your sensitive side thing. It's about pleasing God by imitating God.

A gentle Christian is quick to listen and slow to speak. Before they speak, they give careful thought to the needs of the person they're texting, writing, or talking to. They're willing to say hard things, but they do it graciously, patiently, and with abundant kindness. A gentle Christian doesn't despise or avoid those who seem perpetually unable to take care of themselves or who seem "stuck" with the same needs and issues that never go away. Paul and his companions pleased the Lord through their ministry by relating to the Thessalonians with gentleness.

B) Affectionate

Paul continues the analogy to a nursing mother 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."

The kind of ministry, the kind of relating to other people that pleases the Lord, is affectionate. It's fueled and compelled by a deep and abiding love for them. It might be mundane like changing a diaper. It might be ordinary like inviting a visitor or friend from church to share a meal in your home. But it is not a drudgery because it is carried along by genuine love for the person or group of people you are serving.

God isn't like a commanding officer in the army. "Soldier, I don't care whether you want to do it or not, I don't care whether you're obeying in a "cheerful" way or not, just get the job done and tell me when you're finished." Sent that email – check. Prayed for that friend – check. Studied the bible with my co-worker – check. Corrected by screaming toddler for the 100th time – check. Completed calendar planning session with the wife who's been badgering me to communicate with her for months – check.

It's possible to do ALL of those things simply because you think you're "supposed" to or know they're "right" but your heart isn't in any of them. You're dead and cold on the inside. Friends, that kind of "ministry" is NOT pleasing to the Lord. It's not the way he relates to us. It preaches a false gospel where Christianity is reduced to ticking off a list of performance benchmarks. And it speaks a lie about Jesus! No one is more satisfying, life-giving, and joy-sustaining than him, but our attitude in those moments suggests it's an absolute drudgery.

I'm not talking about having an "affectionate" personality or adding a string of heart emoticons to your messages. I'm talking about crying out to God and asking him to help us see people the way he does so that we might love them the way he does, which ultimately means loving them the way he has loved us. Be honest. Is the way you relate to people driven more by duty or affection? Paul and his companions pleased the Lord by relating to the Thessalonians out of an abundance of affection.

C) Sacrificial

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..." We please the Lord when our

care for other people is (like a nursing mother) gentle, affectionate, and (finally) sacrificial.

If you've nursed a child, you know exactly what I'm talking about! That little one is literally consuming your body. You're producing all their food. And the very act of producing and delivering what they need can have long-term impacts on your physical figure! It costs you something to care for them. You care for your child when no one else is watching, in ways that are NOT glamorous, and never get a "Thank you" in return. It's sacrificial in an intensely physical sense.

The same is true of the kind of one-another ministry that pleases the Lord. Jas 2:14-16, What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?"

Should we prioritize sharing the gospel with someone who doesn't know Jesus? Yes. Is that the greatest gift you could ever give them? Yes. Does that mean the kind of ministry that pleases the Lord is strictly spiritual? No. It's sacrificial in an intensely physical sense for two big reasons: (1) God created our bodies as well as our souls, (2) the Savior we follow physically laid down his life for us.

Jesus didn't give OF himself, out of his excess, or when it was convenient. He gave HIMSELF. The kind of ministry that pleases the Lord is no different. Paul and his companions didn't just share the gospel. They shared their "own selves." Instead of demanding the Thessalonians support them financially, which they had a right to enjoy as apostles, they supported themselves through their own labor. 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 isn't indicting vocational ministry. He's simply urging the Thessalonians (and us) to follow him as he followed Christ by serving people in a way that costs us something. It could be your comfort. It could be your convenience. It could be your financial resources. It could be your personal space at home. We please the Lord when we devote ALL that we have and ALL that we are – our time, our homes, our resources – to sacrificially serving others. Gentle. Affectionate. Sacrificial. We please God by relating to people like a good mother.

2) WE PLEASE GOD BY RELATING TO PEOPLE LIKE A GOOD FATHER

Vv. 11-12, “For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God...”

The Thessalonians lived in a culture that expected fathers to take responsibility for the moral instruction and behavior of their children. For Paul, however, the analogy isn't rooted in pagan culture. It's rooted in God's design for spiritual leadership in the family. Eph 6:4, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Again, does that mean mom shouldn't provide discipline and instruction in the Lord? No. It simply means, dads, that you are uniquely responsible for making sure the mission is accomplished. So how did Paul's ministry among the Thessalonians reflect the strengths of a good father and what can we learn from his example in our own relationships? First, the kind of ministry that pleases the Lord is...

A) Bold

Notice the active verbs in v. 12. We exhorted. We encouraged. We charged you. Their ministry consisted of more than just a provoking life example. It was verbal. It involved speaking to people, boldly urging them to honor the Lord with their life and not give up when obedience is hard. Both a corrective (don't do this) and a formative (do this) authority are in play here.

There's a kind of false, feel-good “community” in the church where everyone's kind to each other but no one ever has guts to speak into somebody else's life with the persistent authority of God's Word. We're so afraid of doing anything that might hurt them or be perceived as insensitive that we never insert our voice into whatever situation they're navigating.

So we sit around and wait to be asked for advice, and if someone does ask, we limit our comments to things like, “Well, this is what I would do...” or, “In my experience, you may want to prayerfully consider the possibility of thinking about the merits of a slightly different approach.” That's nonsense. We're in a spiritual battle, brothers and sisters. We're in a fight with real enemies where the outcome is eternal.

We don't gather to play church like this is all some sort of exercise in make-believe. God is real. Judgement is certain. Salvation is possible. And the choices you make

matter. There is a grave sobriety, a weighty earnestness to the Christian life that demands more than sauntering in on a Sunday, coffee in hand, looking for an uplifting meditation from the pastor and a few minutes of lighthearted conversation before heading out to your favorite lunch spot and an afternoon of football.

Heb 3:12–13, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

We don’t gather for the sake of positive spiritual vibes. We gather to read the Word, sing the Word, pray the Word, and hear the Word of Christ so we will love Jesus for the Treasure he is and not lose heart when it gets hard. Other people need you to exhort them. And you need other people to exhort you. The kind of ministry that please the Lord isn’t “available.” It’s bold.

B) Personal

I love the little three-word-phrase near the beginning of v. 12. “We exhorted each one of you...” Paul and his companions didn’t run around speaking in spiritual generalities. There was nothing generic in their exhortations. There was nothing boilerplate in their encouragements. They were specific. They were personal. They provided the right word, at the right time, in the right way, for a particular individual.

I’m not saying their ministry consisted of nothing but one-on-one counseling. I am saying it wasn’t built on catch-phrases or pat answers. It required slowing down, listening, understanding, and addressing individuals as individuals. Certainly, Paul didn’t hesitate to bring a general charge to a general category of people. He does it all the time in his letters. But there was also a personal quality to his ministry and a personal quality to any ministry that pleases the Lord.

C) God-centered

Notice what all their exhortation and exhortation aimed to accomplish. V. 12, “We exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”



The ultimate goal of our ministry, of the way we relate to one another, is so important. The kind of ministry that pleases the Lord doesn't say whatever will convince someone to make the same choices you've made in every area of life. We want that, especially as parents. But that's not the goal of our ministry. Our goal is to help one another "walk in a manner worthy of God."

We don't want to build a church of lemmings where people go around doing whatever everyone else is doing. There should be something consistently distinctive about our pattern of life as Christians. The Bible is very clear that certain behaviors are consistent with a genuine profession of faith and certain behaviors are not. But within the unity should exist a God-glorifying diversity because we're not ultimately following one another. We're following the Lord. We want to walk in a manner worthy of HIM.

Take care, friend, that when you exhort and encourage and charge a fellow believer, you don't leave them focused on a behavior, a piece of advice, or even your own example. Point them to Jesus. Point them to what God says in his word, to what you see God doing in their life, and to the kind of life God's word tells us is worthy of him. Bold. Personal. God-centered. We please the Lord by relating to people like a good father.

CONCLUSION

We began last Sunday thinking about how difficult it is to persevere in following Jesus and doing what's right in a hard relationship. And it would be easy to think, "Ok, all I have to do to make this thing work is be a little more gentle, affectionate, sacrificial, bold, personal, and God-centered in the way I relate to this person. We should fight to put on all of those qualities, my friends.

But remember this. They are the fruit of a particular root. They are the branches that grow out of a specific kind of tree. And that tree is a man or woman who desires to please the Lord. V. 4 is the key. "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."

Gentleness, affection, sacrifice, boldness, you name it, will NOT endure unless they are the overflow of a deep desire to please the Lord. Make that your focus. Make that your prayer. "Lord, in all my relationships. Easy. Hard. In-between. Give me a



supreme and ruling desire to please you and then show me how to please you in the same way Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy did.

And then let us praise God that every time we fail to speak to please him, every time we are not gentle, affectionate, or bold, he gives more grace. Because of Jesus, our God is quick to forgive. Because of Jesus, our God is eager to empower. Because of Jesus, we know there is no power in heaven or on earth (including our sinful desire to please men) that can separate us from his love. Let us strive to please God, my friends, but let us do so with all our hope for the future firmly fixed on him, thankful that where we are unfaithful, he remains faithful.