

Love Demonstrated in Ministry and Service

I Thessalonians 2:1-12 (and other selected verses)

9/24/23

Prayer

The gospel of God expressed through the word of God empowered by the Spirit of God changes lives. I am energized every time I am given the opportunity to teach or preach from the Scripture because I know God's good news can impact us in very deep ways. And today is no different.

By way of reminder, we are looking at themes found in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians and we've just wrapped up the first of three hallmarks—faith. For the next couple of Sundays, we will look at love and then at hope. Faith, love and hope.

Right now, I suspect some are thinking, "love again? Haven't we covered this already?" Yes we have but here it is showing up again in Scripture—which it does many times—so we are not going to just skip right over it. And honestly, this passage has deeply challenged me. Maybe it will speak to you as well.

We will focus on 2:1-12 with a focus on 7-12 and it is verse 8 that stops me in my tracks and sparks a number of questions for me. Paul wrote, "We loved you so much that we shared with you not only God's Good News but our own lives, too."

We loved you *so much*. To describe the depth of his love, Paul chose a word that is not used anywhere else in the New Testament but was used in his culture to describe an intense longing and desire. Several questions come to mind. Was this true for Paul or was he just exaggerating to make a point? Do I love God's people like this? How did Paul develop this kind of love?

Paul's love had a practical expression. We loved you so much that we shared with you God's Good News. This good news is much more than the message of how Jesus died the cross to give us life.ⁱ Paul shared the full gospel with them and summarized it at the end of verse 12 by saying God called them to share in His Kingdom and glory.

Love didn't stop there though. Paul and his companions loved them so much that they shared with them not only God's Good News but their own lives, as well. They were willing to serve the Thessalonians. F.F. Bruce translates it this way. "We loved you so much that we are willing to put ourselves at your disposal without reservation."

As I said, this verse stops me in my tracks and makes me wonder how he got to this place...and since the Apostle Paul tells us all to follow his example as he follows the example of Christ, I have to ask, how do I get to this place and love in this way?

Paul expressed his love in ministry and service—he shared with them the full gospel of God and his very life. For the remainder of our time let's use the rest of this passage to better understand what this may look like for us and how we might begin to do the same.

Verses one through six address several of my questions. Was Paul stretching the truth about the depth of his love or was he using words to endear himself to the Thessalonians? Gimmicks like that were as common back then as they are today. Paul knew that and addressed it right from the start. Look at his opening verses.

You yourselves know, dear brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not a failure.

Let's stop there a second. The word translated "failure" here emphasizes the content of the visit more than the result of the visit. Paul is not saying, "Hey, we did a great job among you." He is saying, "Our visit was not in vain. It was not an empty vessel. It was sincere and can be trusted. It won't fail them.

² You know how badly we had been treated at Philippi just before we came to you and how much we suffered there. Yet our God gave us the courage to declare his Good News to you boldly, in spite of great opposition. ³ So you can see we were not preaching with any deceit or impure motives or trickery.

In other words, there is no big payday for Paul in this. He and his companions are not getting rich from this effort and their reputations are not improving. Their motive is pure. Their love is genuine. Paul unpacks this a little more.

⁴ For we speak as messengers approved by God to be entrusted with the Good News. Our purpose is to please God, not people. He alone examines the motives of our hearts. ⁵ Never once did we try to win you with flattery, as you well know. And God is our witness that we were not pretending to be your friends just to get your money! ⁶ As for human praise, we have never sought it from you or anyone else.ⁱⁱ

Basically Paul said, the love we displayed by the message we brought and the lives we lived is sincere. From here Paul offers some examples of love we can all understand. Before we read, let's review a couple of familiar images of love that he will apply to himself.

Think about a newborn infant. As that child looks at you, what sort of plan does he or she have to trick you into doing something they want? There is no deceit with a newborn baby; they just tell it like it is. Many philosophers in Paul's day said that infants were innocent of any wrongdoing because they were not yet able to be deceitfully self-seeking.

At the same time, infants are gentle. They are not going to harm you. Keep this image of a truth-telling, harmless infant in your mind as we shift to the child's mother.

Two-thousand years ago, moms did not have a lot of options for feeding a newborn. Those with the financial resources could hire a wet nurse, but other than that, feeding and caring for that helpless little one was up to mom.

A mother's love compels her to get up many times in the night to provide food, care and comfort. Paul's society viewed the role of mother or wet-nurse as one that displayed profound gentleness.

I remember those days. Whether it was Anne nursing or me using a bottle, I have fond memories of what those moments were like. "Hey there, little guy. Are you about ready to eat? Huh? Yeh, there ya go. How about a burp, buddy? Oh there's a big mess...do you feel better now? It looks like someone is ready for a nap!"

But this gentleness does not stand alone. It is combined with great sacrifice.

Night and day mothers give of themselves. That newborn does not serve the mother, the mother serves the newborn. Even though she has authority over her newborn she does not require anything from her child nor is she a burden to her child. Her sacrificial love and service flows from a sincere heart.

With the image of a truth-telling, harmless infant and authoritative yet gentle mother serving at personal cost in mind, listen to Paul's words.

⁷ As apostles of Christ ⁱⁱⁱ we certainly had a right to make some demands of you, but instead we were like children [infants] among you. Or we were like a mother feeding and caring for her own children. ⁸ We loved you so much that we shared with you not only God's Good News but our own lives, too.

⁹ Don't you remember, dear brothers and sisters, how hard we worked among you? Night and day we toiled to earn a living so that we would not be a burden to any of you as we preached God's Good News to you. ¹⁰ You yourselves are our witnesses—and so is God—that we were devout and honest and faultless toward all of you believers.

As an apostle, Paul carried Christ's authority to proclaim the gospel of God, but following Jesus' teaching, Paul did not lord it over others. Instead, he chose to imitate Christ by being sincere, gentle and loving and by serving sacrificially.

Paul now adds one more example of his love, that of a father.

¹¹ And you know that we treated each of you as a father treats his own children.

¹² We pleaded with you, encouraged you, and urged you to live your lives in a way that God would consider worthy. For he called you to share in his Kingdom and glory.

While the public persona of a Roman father was one of a dignified and stern man, most ancient portrayals highlighted a father's love and concern for his children.

Speaking in broad generalities that reflect the culture of Paul's day, the mother expressed her love by caring for and cherishing the child in sacrificial ways while the Father showed his love through instruction, admonishment and guidance.

With the innocent, gentleness of an infant, Paul expressed his love for the Thessalonians as if he was their mother and father.^{iv} These images had deep meaning for Paul and they conveyed the kind of love he felt as he expressed his love through ministry and service.

Ministry has to do with Paul's desire to see them grow in faith, to be healthy, strong and established in the Lord. To understand what that longing was like, we need to think back to an earlier time, to a time not too long ago when cell phones did not exist and long-distance phone calls were a luxury.

In those days, when you sent a child off to start his or her life, you did not know how they were doing until they contacted you or someone you knew sent you word. While you waited, you wondered...I hope they are okay. Did they find a place to stay? Are they healthy? Are they eating well?

These are the questions sparked by love. And then when the phone call or letter arrives announcing that your child is doing very well you feel great relief, almost like new life comes into you.

Listen to Paul's words from the third chapter. "When I could stand it no longer, I sent Timothy to find out whether your faith was still strong...But now Timothy has just returned, bringing us good news about your faith and love...so we have been greatly encouraged...it gives us new life to know that you are standing firm in the Lord" (3:5-8).

Paul's love led him to minister to them and care about their faith. It also led him to serve them. He had the right to receive financial support from them, but he chose not to exercise that right so that he could remove every possible barrier to the gospel (1 Cor 9:3-18). He served them with a love that others could see through his words and actions (1:5; 25, 10).

And this leaves me with the final questions. Do I know this kind of love for other Christians? Do I care about the strength of their faith and how I might help them grow in that faith? If not, how do I grow in my love? I want to share with you a path we can follow, one that helps us express love through ministry and service, and then a practice that helps us deepen that love for others. Let's look at the path.

First, know yourself. Paul told the Roman Christians, "I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given you" (12:3).

Our love, ministry and service must first fit who we are and where we are in our faith. So know yourself, be honest in your evaluation and love others in a way that fits where you are.

Second, use your gifts. The best place to begin loving others in service is to use what you already have. A few verses later Paul tells the Roman Christians,

⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully (12:6-8).

So, use your gifts. Love others by sharing with them what God has already given you.

Third, ask the Father. When the need becomes the master, the servant becomes the slave. As followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are servants to the King not slaves to the need. The first chapter in Mark's gospel records how a massive crowd filled with needy people was pursuing Jesus.

In the morning, before the crowd could assemble again, Jesus went out to a lonely place and was praying there. When the crowd gathered the disciples spread out to look for Him. When they found Him they said, "Everyone is looking for you." And if I can read between the lines, "What are you doing here? The people need you now!"

But following that time of prayer, Jesus told them they had other places to go. He walked away from that needy crowd. He had asked the Father and so was doing what the Father instructed rather than what the need demanded.

When the need becomes the master, the servant becomes the slave. We are servants of the King and not slaves to the need. When it comes to expressing love through ministry and service, remember to ask the Father.

Fourth, check your motive. First Corinthians 13 reminds us that if our words and actions are not grounded in love, they really don't make the kind of difference God wants to see. If there is even a tiny bit of love, go for it. If the motive is from something other (compulsion or obligation), ask the Lord to reveal the barrier in your heart...and He will.

Finally, step out. In John 20:21 Jesus told His disciples—and I believe this includes us as well—"As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Jesus was sent in love to express that love through ministry and service.

Based on the faith we have, using the gifts we've received, guided by the Father's direction and grounded at some level in love, step out, knowing that you are sent by the Lord to express His love to His people.

That's the path. Now, let's look at the practice.

You have probably already seen this, but this entire path fits within the context of prayer. Prayer is essential for deepening our love for God; it is also essential for deepening our love for others. Based on the number of times Paul mentions prayer in all of his letters, I think prayer for others is one of the reasons Paul's love went so deep.

He told the Thessalonians, "We pray for you constantly." "We never stop thanking God" for the way you responded to the gospel. "Night and day we pray earnestly for you"^v

God uses prayer to deepen our love for the people we pray for.

Do you remember this prayer that Brently had us pray for the person on our right and left last week? It comes from Philippians 1:9-11 and is an example of the kind of request Paul offered for the people he knew. While it is good to pray for healing, for the new job or restored relationship or whatever the specific need, it is vitally important that we also pray for their faith.

As we close out today, I'd like to ask you to commit to praying for one person you meet in this room this morning. As we linger after the service just get their name, put it in a pop-up reminder on your phone and determine that you will pray for them a couple of times this week. And then select a prayer from scripture that you will use.

You can find prayers for growth in faith as well as plenty of information to craft your own prayers in 1 Thessalonians 5 or the first chapter of Philippians or Ephesians.

If your honest evaluation and level of faith opens the way, then go one step further. As you are talking with this person ask for a specific prayer request and add that to your prayers. And if it fits where you are in your walk with the Lord, go ahead and pray for them this morning. Just hearing you pray for them by name will bring a blessing to them.

So, get their name. Or, get their name and prayer request. Or, get their name, prayer request and pray for them this morning. No matter which step you take this morning, decide to pray for this person several times this week, focusing your prayers for them on God growing their faith. You can find great examples in the first chapter of Ephesians or Philippians or the fifth chapter of 1 Thessalonians. Praying for others in this way changes us and blesses them.

Prayer:

Paul's words and example challenge us, Lord. He loved them so deeply that he joyfully gave from what he had and who he was for their benefit. It is a scary request, but would you grow that kind of love for one another in our lives too, please?

Like your disciples so many years ago, we ask you to teach us to pray, to pray in a way that fills up gaps in faith and leads to a deepened love for others. May this week of prayer start the ball rolling that we grow in Paul's example of constant, earnest prayer for

one another. Fill in the faith-gaps that exist in our own lives so that we might become more like you.

ⁱ God's gospel includes how the Father chooses, the Son redeems and the Spirit brings us alive to God. But it is not just about what God has done for us.

The good news also includes how God is creating a new community of people who live out His love as they do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with their God (Micah 6:8). But it is not just about individuals and a new community. It is also about how God will one day redeem and restore all of creation, knowing that when Christ returns "creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

ⁱⁱ I am struck by how much Paul's cultural context mirrors our own. Paul had to deal with rumors about his ministry as others questioned his motives, undercut his ministry and tried to dilute his impact. I appreciate the way Paul appeals to their own knowledge of this. You were there. You saw how we lived among you. In the tenth verse he writes, "you yourselves are our witnesses—and so is God—that we were devout and honest and faultless toward all of you believers."

Based on Paul's defense here and in other letters, I can't help but wonder what it would have been like if they had social media!

ⁱⁱⁱ An apostle is a sent one who carries the full authority of the sender. He and the others had the right to receive financial support from those they served. Paul chose not to exercise that right for the sake of removing every possible barrier to the gospel going out (1 Cor 9:3-18)

See also 2 Thess 3:7-9; 2 Cor 11:7-11

Paul understood the Lord's instruction to mean that the Jesus' servants were entitled to their maintenance but not compelled to require it. He refused to be a financial burden on the churches he planted and served.

^{iv} In other letters Paul talks about being in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in them or about becoming their father in the faith (Gal 4:19; 1 Cor 4:15).

^v 1:2; 2:13; 3:9-10.