

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

The Quality of Paul's Service (1)

Introduction

The value of this chapter is the insight it gives into Paul's pastoral heart. Able to see his mind, emotions and soul. If we have pastoral concern for anyone – a leader in the church or Sunday School, a parent, or someone who is helping and encouraging another – this chapter and the next will touch and challenge us.

While he was different from us because he was an apostle (i.e. he had seen the risen Lord, was commissioned as an eye witness and had special inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and therefore able to pen authoritative scriptures), Paul was also like us in his pastoral concern and care. A most valuable model is given.

Paul's response to criticism

Need to recall background in order for this passage to make sense. At Philippi, Paul was insulted and had to suffer (Acts 16:22-34). He and Silas were beaten and put in prison. Feet in stocks, he endured suffering and humiliation. Then at Thessalonica the Jews became jealous (Acts 17:1-9) and organised a mob to start a riot, and accused Jason for giving the missionaries hospitality. Paul and Silas were accused of causing trouble everywhere, defying the authority of the Roman Emperor by saying there was another king called Jesus. They were in hiding, and were not caught, and had to escape the city under cover of darkness. They were shipped to Berea where they had a much better reception.

Imagine how he must have been criticised by his enemies. Reading between the lines here, his enemies conducted a smear campaign, discrediting Paul in order to discredit the Gospel he preached. We can imagine he was accused of insincerity, only in the job for what he could get out of it in terms of money and importance. Among the converts were a number of prominent women (Acts 17:4), and no doubt Paul's enemies put the worst possible construction on that. When they escaped under cover of darkness, that was probably interpreted as cowardice, bad conscience, abandoning the young Christians. Then his failure to return would have been interpreted in the worst possible light too. N.B. The Lord Himself was criticized and misrepresented. He was taken as a glutton and wine bibber, as being seditious, mad and in league with the devil.

Criticism is the lot of us all, especially if we are Christians. And those in leadership are special targets, often from those who claim to be on their side and who ought to be loyal. Public men must expect public criticism, and as the public are not infallible, we must be prepared to be criticised in ways that are not fair or pleasant. Need always to ask of any criticism if it is justified, instead of immediately rushing to our own defence. Criticism, especially from those who love us and wish us well, is to be noted. Perhaps we do need to change our ways and apologise.

But much criticism is hostile, spiteful, ill-informed, malicious and untrue. How do we react? Very often wise to say and do nothing. Then the matter will soon be forgotten. If we defend ourselves, we only keep the matter going and alive. People say there must be something in it if we get upset and indignant. On the other hand, if we say nothing it may be said that we have no answer. But there are times when it is better to say nothing, especially if the attack is personal and spiteful. **When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate** (1 Peter 2:23). Let the truth come to light. In Spurgeon's "Lectures to my students" there is a chapter headed "Blind eyes and deaf ears", which Spurgeon explains are necessary qualities needed by ministers. In an old castle, a former owner wrote these words – "They say. What do they say? Let them say." Spurgeon says, "These words need to be learned by heart by thin-skinned persons".

But sometimes it is necessary to speak, especially if the truth of the Gospel is at stake, and also if the future of the church and the good name of the people of God is at stake, and to protect young Christians. Must not react out of pique or vanity. But it may be necessary to explain, refute false charges, set record straight and point out misreporting and distortion of the truth. This is how Paul reacts to the situation at Thessalonica.

Before we look in detail at Paul's defence, note three points.

- (1) The openness of his ministry. **With the help of our God we dared to tell you our Gospel in spite of strong opposition** (1 Thessalonians 2:2). "Dared" – they spoke with frankness, boldness and plainness. The Greek verb used is the same often used by Luke in Acts to describe the ministry of the Apostles.
- (2) His willingness to suffer. He had suffered both at Philippi and Thessalonica. Yet God supported him. This was proof of his genuineness. People suffer only for what they believe in.
- (3) His appeal to the readers for confirmation. The words "as you know" occur six times in the first two chapters. His ministry was in the open before God and others. Happy are leaders and workers who are absolutely transparent and honest, and have no need to conceal and hush up anything. They can appeal to God and fellows as witnesses about their conduct, time, and the quality of their work.

Then Paul uses four terms to describe his aims and work which he did – steward (2:3-4), mother (2:5-8), father(2:9-12) and herald (2:13-16).

Paul's role as a steward (2:3,4)

The word steward is not used, but is implied in the word "entrusted". **We speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel.** God had entrusted the Gospel to Paul, just as a house-holder entrusts his property to his steward. Paul uses this idea many times when he is explaining his sense of privilege in having the Gospel committed to him, or his sense of responsibility to be faithful to his stewardship (Galatians 2:7; 1 Timothy 1:11; Titus 1:3; 1 Corinthians 4:1, 9:17; 2 Timothy 2:2).

The Gospel Paul brought to the Thessalonians was not the fruit of error, because it was God's Gospel. Nor was it exercised with impure motives. He did not work from

ambition, pride or popularity. Nor was he trying to trick them. There was no undue pressure to get conversions. He did not conceal the cost of discipleship or offer fraudulent blessings. In the world of the first century there were many roaming “philosophers”, jugglers, sorcerers, fakes and swindlers, who used many tricks to impress and win round their audiences. Paul was not one of them.

It is a good thing to examine ourselves and our motives in Christian work from time to time. Are we truthful, honest, and with no motive that springs from self-interest and popularity? Paul’s message was true, his motives were pure, and his methods were open and above board. God had approved him and found him to be a fit worker. God had entrusted him with the Gospel, and he was aware of what an awesome responsibility that was. Also he was concerned to please God and not men.

God tested the heart (2:4), τω δοκιμαζοντι (continuous tense, He keeps on doing it). The secret of Christian ministry is its God-centeredness. We are not primarily responsible to a society, church or denomination. We are answerable to Him in the end. This is often lost sight of when decisions are being made. Instead of asking “What is the Lord’s will?” or “Will we please Him?”, our concern is “How will this affect so and so?” or “What will people’s reaction be?” Far too many decisions are overshadowed by “they” and “them”, and not “He” and “Him”.

*“Dare to do right.
Dare to be true.
Keep the great judgement seat
Always in view”*

God scrutinizes hearts and their secrets. His standards are very high. Yet this is very reassuring because God is more knowledgeable, impartial and merciful than any human being or church committee. To be accountable to Him is to be delivered from tyranny of human critics.

Paul’s role as a “mother” (2:5-8)

Paul begins this section with a negative statement to show he was free of unworthy motives. He says he never used flattery, i.e. seeking to gain influence for selfish ends, nor put on mask to cover up greed. Neither was he looking for praise from men. Paul was honoured and praised, but he did not seek it. Flattery, deceit and hunger for compliments are all ways of using others to build selves up.

As an Apostle he could have been a burden, i.e. by giving orders or insisting on financial support, but instead he was gentle like a mother caring for her children (2:7). And notice his love is so great that he shared with them not only the Gospel but his life, because they were so dear to him (2:8). Christian ministry involves giving self as well as giving a message. Far from using them for his own ends, he gives himself to serve them. In service to others we need to show the concern, gentleness and self-sacrifice of a mother in attitude and treatment.

N.B. One other point – the Gospel is “the Gospel of God”. Not the ideas of a religious genius or superlative thinker. The Gospel is about God and comes to us from God. One way of proving that – if it were man’s idea, the Gospel would put man on a

pedestal more than it does. Instead, it speaks of man's sin, helplessness, weakness and doom. His only hope is not in himself but in God's grace and mercy. No man would have dreamed up such a message.

Conclusion

Enormous challenge to people in Christian work. Inner thoughts, desires and motives are probed. We can forget this if a meeting went well and people commended us and said nice things. **God desires truth in the inner parts** (Psalm 51:6). George Muller wrote, "There was a day when I died. Utterly dead. I died to George Muller – his opinions and preferences, tastes and will. I died to the world – its approval and censure. I died to the approval and blame even of my brethren and friends. Since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God".