

# A RECEPTIVE HEART

## *SERIES: SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY, GROWING CHURCH*

By Danny Hall

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In the last several series of messages at PBC, there has been a common theme of the responsibility and privilege we have as the people of God to take the message of Christ to the whole world—from where we live all the way to the ends of the earth, and everything in between. That's a pretty daunting task. But the wonderful thing about Scripture is that in it God gives us all kinds of great models, both of individuals and of churches that help us to understand our place in that responsibility.

The book we're studying now, 1 Thessalonians, supplies such a model. In it we're looking at a group of people whom God birthed in a very difficult situation and raised up to be an incredible witness of the Lord. This book is a wonderful story about Paul's life and ministry among the Thessalonians and how they responded, grew, and lived out their faith. The more I study and work in this book, the more excited I am to see how God was using these people. They were just ordinary people like us, and God took them from where they were, raised them up in the power of the Spirit, and turned them into a group of people so in love with him that they were infecting everyone around them.

This series is titled *Seven Characteristics of a Healthy, Growing Church*. In the last message in chapter 1 we identified the first characteristic: a vital connection with the living God. One of the things that resounds from the first chapter is Paul's thankfulness for the wonderful thing that God did in their midst. These people were so passionately in love with the Lord that their testimonies were bouncing off the hillsides all around them. Everywhere Paul went, word had already gotten there about what God had been doing in the Thessalonian church. So being vitally connected to the living God, in love with Jesus, is our foundation.

Now in chapter 2 we'll glean the second characteristic, along with a rich picture of Paul's ministry and life among the Thessalonians. Let's read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-16:

**For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition. For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts. For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness—nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.**

**For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.**

In this wealth of information Paul gives us a wonderful picture of godly ministry as he talks about his heart and his approach to ministry among them. He then gives us a glimpse of how the Thessalonians responded to that ministry. From this picture I hope we can get an idea of how God can use us as well.

All this happened in the context of great persecution, and in the next message we'll deal a little more closely with the way God uses persecution to grow us up.

### **A picture of godly and loving ministry**

Apparently, those who opposed the apostle Paul and the church of Thessalonica were disparaging Paul, trying to bring him down. They evidently began to accuse him of all kinds of things such as trying to build his own movement and seduce people away from their religion or culture. We saw in chapter 1 that the opposition primarily came out of the Jewish community, which made the amazing claim, "These men who have upset the world have come here also...." The status quo was being overturned, their religious prominence challenged. Now in chapter 2 they had accused Paul of being a charlatan, someone who was after his own personal gain. So Paul speaks to those accusations and reminds the Thessalonians of how God had worked when he was among them.

In this picture of his godly ministry, Paul begins by talking about his character. Verse 3: "For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit...." First, the message itself came with no error. The word "error" means wandering. Paul is saying that he kept to the straight path of God's truth. He wasn't teaching his own opinions or developing some new philosophy. Interestingly enough, he would have been teaching from the Old Testament Scriptures, which is what his detractors were trying to use against him. He is simply saying, "I was truly rooted and grounded in the word of God, explaining to you that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that these opponents claim to hold dear. That message wasn't something that I concocted. I wasn't wandering away from the truth of God."

But more than that, Paul says his own heart had no impurity or deceit. The word "impurity" means uncleanness. He is probably speaking of his motives. He did not come with impure motives, to seduce them away to something false and strange, or to build himself up, as he will explain in the verses that follow. His heart was clean and pure before them, his motives true. The word "deceit" is the word for bait. He didn't bait them, or deceive them by covering a false message with a veneer of religious vocabulary and charisma. He spoke to them honestly and clearly from the Scriptures.

Paul understood something very important: his salvation and calling were from God, and thus his accountability was to God. Verse 4: "But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel...." Paul took very seriously that God had entrusted him with the precious treasure of the good news. "So we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts." His real accountability was to God, not to anyone else.

He says in verse 5, “For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness....” Flattering speech is external, something they could observe. Greed is internal, which God would know. And their witness and God’s witness were the same. “Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority.” In all of this Paul is saying, “I wasn’t trying to impress you. I wanted you to find God.”

Now, I’ve been in ministry a long time. I know from firsthand experience, day by day, how hard it is to minister with this kind of character. The truth is, we all want to be liked and affirmed. We want other people to think we’ve got it together and we’re doing a good job. We have to deal with the reality that part of our emotional well-being hangs on how people respond to what we say. It’s so easy to get seduced into following that. And I’m sure Paul was a normal human being who had those same feelings. He wanted to be affirmed and liked. But here he recognizes the danger of living our lives by how other people respond to us. He says, “I was saved by God and his grace. I was called by God and his grace. And I am accountable to the God of grace. That’s who I am, and that’s how I ministered among you.”

Paul goes on to beautifully illustrate the character and heart he had with them. How did his character flow into the way he actually treated them? In verses 7-11 he uses two wonderful metaphors. First in verse 7 he says he was like a mother to them, and then in verse 11 he says he was like a father to them. He begins, “We proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.” He goes on to say, “Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.”

There is nothing quite as special as a mother’s love. I love my son, and I’ve had twenty wonderful years with him. There are all kinds of ways that we enjoy that relationship. But my son’s relationship with his mom is just special. There’s probably nothing as strong and protective and nurturing as a mother’s love. Paul says, “This is the way our hearts were toward you. We nurtured you and cared for you, tenderly loved you, and we were willing to give our very lives for you. It wasn’t just ministry; we gave all of ourselves to you.”

He goes on in verse 9, “For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.” He is saying, “We were willing to sacrifice everything, to do whatever it took in order to minister the gospel of God to you, to love you and build you up in God’s kingdom. So we didn’t ask you to support us.” We don’t know if Paul applied his tent-making trade or if he had some other kind of work he was doing to help make ends meet on this journey. But he and the others gave themselves to the Thessalonians, working night and day to support themselves in order to share God’s love for them. That was the kind of sacrificial love they had for the Thessalonians. They nurtured them as a mother would love them, with all their heart and soul and being.

He continues, “You know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children....” A dad wants to encourage and set a challenge for his children, give them a sense of direction and long-range purpose. That’s what Paul says he was doing among them. “We were challenging you and encouraging you, begging you to go for it!” A dad can be a great cheerleader for his kids. “Find out what God has for you to do! Dream big dreams! Go for it 100% for the Lord!” That’s what kind of dad Paul was among them. He was their champion. He wanted to stand beside them and see them reach their full potential in the Lord.

Throughout this whole section we see Paul pouring out his heart in deep, sacrificial love. The amazing thing is that these were people he hadn’t even known before he got there. He showed up in their town and just started preaching the gospel, and when people started responding, his heart was knit to them.

Probably at the outside this letter was written two years after that first visit to the Thessalonian church, still very early in his relationship with them. Yet he had this incredible love for them.

The picture of parenthood is apropos. Before our son was born I didn't know him, either. But it didn't take me long to fall desperately in love with him and want to be the best dad I could be for him. Paul was the same way. As soon as God brought these people into the kingdom as newborn babes in Christ, he had a parent's love for them that would lead him to give his all for them.

Paul wanted to teach the word honestly and clearly to them, and to love them with his whole being. Why is this picture of Paul's godly ministry so important? He tells us in verse 12: "So that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory."

## **Producing followers of Christ**

What Paul was trying to do was produce followers of Christ, not followers of men. There is a huge difference. Unfortunately, across the Christian world today there are many people ministering in the name of Jesus who are trying to get people to follow them, not Jesus.

The two most important passages to me over my years in ministry have been 1 Thessalonians 2 and 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. They have kept me rooted in the things that are most important. In 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 Paul speaks the same truth to the Corinthian church as he does to the Thessalonians:

"And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God."

Paul wanted what happened in their life to be a work of God, not a work of his own, and he wanted to produce followers of Christ, not followers of men. That is why he was so passionately willing to sacrifice his all, why he wanted to stay true to the word and not waver from it one bit. In the power of the Holy Spirit he wanted to see God take that word and use him to transform these people into the people that God wanted them to be.

Now, in a single beautiful verse he gives us a picture of the Thessalonians' godly response to his ministry. Verse 13: "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." That is one of the most amazing statements in all of Scripture! The first time I read that I thought it arrogant. But now I don't think Paul was arrogant at all. Rather, he was extremely confident in the power of the word, energized by the Spirit, spoken through a person whose heart is open and given to the Lord. He says, "When we came among you with all of this, you people had receptive hearts. You wanted to hear the truth. And when the word was brought to you, you took it for what it was: God was speaking." The incredible thing is that because these people had a receptive heart, they then became fit for the battle that they would face right on the heels of their birth as believers. They came to Christ in the face of enormous opposition and persecution, and they were already people in whom God was working mightily.

You see, following men is expedient and fickle. When you hear an articulate spokesman introduce something that sounds like a great new idea, what it usually means is that they have touched some

immediate need that you feel. You think, "This will make me better off!" This past week it was very hot and it was hard to sleep, so one night I went downstairs and began channel-surfing on TV. Do you know how many late-night shows are about the next way to make a million bucks? These info-mercials were on channel after channel. When you hear one of those, something inside you clicks on and says, "I want to be the next millionaire!" It reminded me that usually people follow men because it's expedient for them. It sounds good at the moment because it speaks to some need in their heart.

But when you follow men, it's also very fickle. It's doomed to fail. It's up and down with the tides. When pressure or opposition comes, or it doesn't work out the way you thought, you want to bail and try the next new idea.

Following God may be costly, but it is fulfilling and eternal. That's what the Thessalonians were willing to do. Paul says, "The word came and you heard it for what it was, the word of God, not our word, and you listened to it and responded. And it is the word that performs its work in you who believe."

## **The power of God's word**

You see, the proclamation of the word is incarnated in the people of God. It is by this wonderful, mysterious mixture of Spirit and word and proclaimer that people hear and are changed. A passage that is often used to talk about the greatness of Scripture is 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." The word translated "inspired" literally means God-breathed, and as far as we can find out, it appears only here, nowhere else in literature anywhere, at any time. Paul seems to have coined this word because he needed to have something that richly describes the greatness of the Scriptures.

Now, in the last hundred years or so, when there has been so much battle over whether the Bible is really the word of God, we have tended to use these verses in 2 Timothy to defend the accuracy of Scripture. The Scriptures are God-breathed; therefore they are trustworthy and accurate. While that is an important truth, I think it is a derived truth, not the main meaning of this word "inspired." What this word really means to me is that God is present in his word. He has breathed his life into it. It is not some static thing on a page, but dynamic and living. So it is powerful to transform lives. That's what Paul saw happening in the lives of the Thessalonians.

This is really good news, because it means that all you and I have to do to be effective in ministry is to have humble hearts before the Lord and open hearts toward people, and to rely on the Holy Spirit to share Scripture. A lot of us think we have to figure out how to answer every question, get really good at studying the Bible for ourselves, do analytical outlines and teaching outlines, and so on; and if we get that far, maybe we'll be able to be an effective minister. I would never for a moment disparage the importance of discipleship and growing in the word and learning to study and handle it well, but we are missing the point if we think that until we achieve that level of proficiency we can't minister for the Lord. *The good news of this is that it's the Scriptures, not our ability, that changes lives.* If we stay true to the word and let the Holy Spirit work through his word, amazing things can happen. You know, the Lord has given me a lot of wonderful opportunities to learn how to study the Scriptures, and he's given me years of experience and opportunities to teach and share. But I'd still say that probably the richest, best times of ministry, when I've seen God do some of the most dramatic things, have been situations where all I was doing was sitting down with another person and reading the Bible, letting the Spirit of God open their hearts to the truth.

One of my favorite stories in the Old Testament is David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17). My favorite part of

that story is the question of what weapon David will use. David, this young teenager shows up, brash but full of faith in the Lord, and says he will go fight Goliath. So they bring him in to King Saul, and he offers David his own armor. So they give him the sword and put the armor on him. But David says, “I don’t know what to do with this sword and shield.” Now pause for a moment and think. Later in life David will learn how to use that gear, and will become a very good swordsman. But he doesn’t know how to do it at this point. So he says, “I’ve got to use the weapons I can use right now. I’ll take my sling and a few stones and God. That’s good enough for me.”

That is a beautiful picture of ministry for us. It’s not about when we learn how to use the sword and the shield and the full armor. We want to do that, and we will, just as David learned how to become a better warrior for God. But at that moment with the challenge before him, all he knew how to do was to take that sling and some stones, and he went forward with that. We are always challenged to continue to grow and learn more and to be more effective, but we must never believe that God can’t use us right now as who we are, whatever our level of skill or knowledge of the word is, as we just trust God to go out with the power of the Spirit, an open and loving heart for people, and the word of God. God can do amazing things with that. That is what Paul is celebrating in this church in Thessalonica.

So the second characteristic of a healthy, growing church is that it has a deep reliance on the word of God. By that I mean two things: First, we ourselves are open and receptive to the word so that God can change us, as the Thessalonian people were. And second, we understand that the word of God is our tool for ministry. That is what the Spirit uses to change people’s lives. So a healthy, growing church is first vitally connected with the living God, in love with Jesus; and second, deeply reliant on the word of God. Again, the good news is that we can do this! We can be what God wants us to be, not because of any greatness we have, but because of God’s greatness and the power of his word.

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