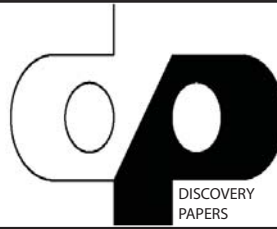


GIVE YOUR LIFE AWAY

SERIES: BETWEEN THE TIMES



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1 & 2 Thessalonians
3rd Message
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1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Brennan Manning, a popular writer and speaker, wrote this, long after he had become popular: “The opinions of others exert a subtle but controlling pressure on the words I speak and the words I stuff; the tyranny of my peers controls the decisions I make and the ones I refuse to make. I am afraid of what others may say.”¹

Can you relate? I can.

Then again, there’s the apostle Paul, who spoke boldly, not to please people but to please God. Moreover, far from ingratiating himself to people, he invested in them. How did he do it? Can we do it? Let’s have a look at 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12.

In 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10 and 2:13-16, which we considered last week, Paul describes the effect that the gospel had on the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12, he describes how he and his companions brought the gospel to them.

Pleasing God

1 Thessalonians 2:1-6:

For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. ²But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. ³For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, ⁴but 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. ⁵For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. ⁶Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.

Paul and his companions boldly declared the gospel to the Thessalonians even though they encountered

persecution for doing so both in Philippi, their previous stop, and in Thessalonica. Why did they do so when declaring the gospel got them in so much trouble? Their boldness was “in our God”: God inspired them and empowered them. Moreover, the message they preached, which took the form of an exhortation, originated from God and was therefore trustworthy, without error or impurity. No deceit was involved: Paul and his companions were not deceived; neither did they deceive others.

God, who was responsible for the message, conveyed it to Paul and his companions. Indeed, he “entrusted” them with the gospel. Having been entrusted with the gospel, they spoke—and they spoke boldly. Although they spoke to people, they didn’t speak to please people—to impress them or win their favor. Instead, they spoke to please God, who gave them the message and commanded them to speak the message. They understood themselves to be beholden to God alone.

When Paul and his companions communicated the gospel, they didn’t resort to flattery. Some people butter up their listeners because they want something from them—money or recognition, for example. Paul and his companions didn’t present false version of themselves. They didn’t want anything from the Thessalonians; they only wanted to please God, and God would not be pleased with messengers who spoke in such a way so as to line their pockets or stoke their ego.

Invite Jesus into your fear

Do you care about what people think of you, or what certain people think of you, to the extent that it hinders you from responding to what God thinks of you and doing what he wants you to do? If you’re like me, your answer is yes. When people are asked what they’re afraid of, public speaking routinely ranks high on their lists. When people speak publicly, they are not usually nervous because they fear that God is going to disapprove of them. No, they’re nervous because they fear that their listeners are going to disapprove of them. We read about Paul, who spoke not to please people but to please God, and we can’t relate. We wish we could relate, but we can’t.

It may be helpful to know that Paul couldn't relate to this depiction of himself, either. It wasn't as if he had no fear. In fact, shortly after he spoke in Thessalonica to please God, not people, he spoke in Corinth—but not without fear. In Corinth, the Lord said to Paul in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people” (Acts 18:9-10). Why did the Lord need to tell Paul not to be afraid of people if he weren't subject to such fear? Paul was not bold by nature. He says as much in 1 Thessalonians 2:2: when he spoke in Thessalonica, he had boldness not in himself but in God. Paul was afraid of what people thought. The Lord knew it, and the Lord helped him.

Are you afraid of what people think? If so, the Lord knows it, and the Lord will help you. And he helps you best if you, through prayer, acknowledge your fear and invite him into it. When you invite Jesus into your fear, your fear becomes a sacred meeting place. He is not put off by your fear any more than he was put off by Paul's fear. On the contrary, he wants to draw near to you in your fear. If you let him, it might even be said that Jesus loves your fear, because he loves drawing near to you, and it may certainly be said that when you let him draw near, God is pleased.

Jesus said, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink” (John 7:37). If, for example, you are thirsty for acceptance, come to Jesus and drink his love of you.

True courage

As you invite God into your fear, don't expect him to eliminate it. Paul was bold in God in Thessalonica, but it's not as if his fear went away, for God had to meet him again in Corinth. Even if your fear won't go away, you don't have to capitulate to it. You can act even if you're afraid. Boldness is not necessarily the absence of fear; boldness is sometimes acting in spite of fear.

Courageous characters in the movies, on the other hand, never seem to be afraid. If you watch enough movies, you might think that courage is fearlessness. James Bond stares death in the face, dispatches the bad guy without breaking a sweat, and adjusts his collar when he's through. But James Bond isn't a real person. Real people get afraid. But God can inspire and empower real people to be bold in the face of fear that doesn't go away. As Larry Crabb says, “God gives courage: not the sort that stills trembling legs but the kind that helps us move forward on them.”²

For example, if you're a follower of Jesus, are you afraid of sharing the gospel because you're afraid of what people will think of you? Full disclosure: I am. I fear that if I tell people about Jesus, they will label me, and I don't want to be labeled. As you meet with God in your fear, don't capitulate to your fear. Quite simply, it is possible to share the gospel even though you're afraid to do so. It is quite possible to tell someone about Jesus even if you're afraid of what she'll think about you. Right?

After all, if you believe the gospel, the gospel has been entrusted to you. And what a message it is, originating from God and therefore thoroughly trustworthy, without error, impurity, or deceit! Like Paul, and his companions, we have been entrusted with the gospel; therefore, we speak. Perhaps we might even hear the Lord speak to us, as he spoke to Paul: “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.” And when you do speak, don't get sidetracked by social or political issues. When Paul came to Thessalonica, he spoke about Jesus. Do that: Speak about Jesus.

I've long been inspired by the prophet Micaiah, who was urged to speak “favorably” to the king. Micaiah's response? “As the Lord lives, what the Lord says to me, that I will speak” (1 Kings 22:13-14).

If you invite God into your fear of people, he might just send you out to invest in people. Look at Paul and his companions in verses 7-12.

Sharing our own selves

1 Thessalonians 2:7-12:

But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. ⁸So, 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. ⁹For 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. ¹⁰You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. ¹¹For you know how, like a father with his children, ¹²we 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.

Paul acknowledges that he and his companions could have rightly asserted their authority as apostles. If they had done so, however, the Thessalonians might have responded by opening up their wallets and fawning all over them. Therefore, instead of asserting their authority, they acted in a “gentle” manner, like a nursing mother with infants, nourishing them with the gospel. A nursing mother not only nourishes her children, she also gives her life to her children. That’s what Paul and his companions did. Yes, they gave the Thessalonians the gospel message, but as they did so, they also gave them their own lives. And they did so not only because God had entrusted them with the gospel but also because they were “affectionately desirous” for the Thessalonians, who “had become very dear” to them.

Paul’s affection for the Thessalonians manifested itself in another way: he worked long hours, probably as a leather worker, to provide for himself and not place a financial burden on them, although it would have been within his purview as an apostle to preach the gospel full-time, as he did in Corinth (Acts 18:5, 1 Corinthians 9:14). On the other hand, it’s hard to imagine Paul not seeing the workshop as a setting for evangelism.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that, all in all, they could find no fault in the behavior of him and his companions. The gospel, which the Thessalonians believed, was imparted to them by believable people.

Finally, Paul and his companions not only loved the Thessalonians like a mother; they also loved them like a father. A nursing mother with infants is gentle. A father with older children (or a mother with older children, for that matter) uses more advanced speech, and different kinds of speech, to motivate them. That’s what Paul and his companions did: they exhorted, encouraged, and implored each of the Thessalonians.

Paul and his companions used this kind of speech to encourage the Thessalonians to walk, or live, in a manner that demonstrated the worth of God. God himself demonstrated his worth by calling the Thessalonians, through the preaching of his messengers, “into his own kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2:12). If they value being part of God’s kingdom, then they are more apt to live as he would have them live, knowing that his will is for their best.

Invest in people

If you invite Jesus into your fear, and if you experience his love for you in your fear, he’s meeting

a deep need in you for acceptance. You’re a wreck, and he loves you. Jesus said, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37-38). As you drink the love of Jesus and he meets that deep need in you for acceptance, you might begin to feel less need of it from others—and less need to present to them a false version of yourself. You might then find yourself feeling something for other wrecks like you, becoming, in Paul’s words, “affectionately desirous” of them, and you might feel that something needs to get out of you. Living water, welling up inside you, wants to flow out of you. Try to stop it and you foul up the waters. Let it flow, and it will stay pure. You might begin to think, in view of your experience of Jesus, that you have something to offer others.

If you believe the gospel, you’ve been entrusted with it. There’s something else you’ve been entrusted with: your life. Now, what will you do with it? What did Paul do with his? He gave the Thessalonians his life. What do you do with your life? You give it away. Instead of ingratiating yourself to people to win their favor, you invest in people because you love them. Verse 8 has long been important to me. It reminds me that I’m called not only to study, teach, and impart the words of the gospel but also to invest my life in people.

If you’re a believer, who are the people that you are investing in, or who are the people you can invest in? Here are some possibilities. If you have a job, consider the people with whom you work. Like many people in this area, and like the apostle Paul, for that matter, you may be working long hours. Because work is such a priority in our area, and because people are working long and hard, strong connections are often made in the workplace. Remember, you’re working for Christ, and your workplace, like every place in your life, is a setting for the gospel. Second, consider the children’s and youth ministries at our church. The harvest is plentiful, and the workers are few. It’s not easy growing up in this area, and it’s certainly not easy to grow up to find and follow Jesus here. Alice Yan, our children’s pastor, and Rolana Smith, our youth pastor, would love to help you invest in some kids.

Once you identify some people to invest in, how might you go about investing in them?

First, get to know them, as Paul got to know the Thessalonians. You get to know people first of all by listening to them and hearing their hearts. You ask questions, and you listen to the answers. Second,

always remember that truth is caught as much as it is taught. Paul's conduct was beyond reproach. The truth you impart should be believable not only because it's true but also because it's coming from someone who's believable. You must therefore make your relationship with the Lord your first priority. Finally, insofar as you have opportunity to speak, be sensitive to how you should speak. Sometimes, you will need to be gentle. Other times, you will need to be challenging. Sometimes, you will need to comfort the disturbed; other times you will need to disturb the comfortable.

I came to Christ when I was sixteen, and in my twenties, some friends, including Joanie Burnside, who is part of our church, challenged me to invest in teenagers. That's what Joanie was doing, by the way. She said, "You'd be good with youth." I fought my friends off for a while, but finally, at age twenty-eight, twelve years after coming to Christ, the living water in me became irrepressible. I had to let it flow out of me. I got out of the pews and began helping with a church youth group, teaching Bible studies and hanging out with high school students. A funny thing happened: they became "very dear" to me. Before long, between studying, teaching, and hanging out, I was probably spending as much time in youth ministry as I was in my "real job" as an editor.

Joanie, by the way, along with her husband Rob, is still at it, some thirty-five years after she challenged me, investing in junior high school students, although her children have long since graduated not only from junior high school but from high school also. Oh, and one of the junior high students she currently invests in? My daughter. Oh, the poetry of God!

I was struck last week when Spencer Liu shared in our worship service by how many people from our church had invested in him. He said Bob and Muriel Thompson, Lynne Fox, and Ed Woodhall all invested in him. By the way, if you want to learn about investing in people, Ed Woodhall is a good person to learn from. He gives his life away by investing in men. He's now an elder emeritus, but he's still doing what he's always done: giving his life away. Spencer shared that Ed challenged him to "do something crazy for God." That's precisely what Spencer did, taking a job in a part of the world that isn't friendly to the gospel and

sharing the gospel with people there. I'm also struck, now that I think about it, that Bob, Muriel, Lynne, Ed, and even Joanie are all, let's just say, closer to the end of their lives than to the beginning. We need new people to step up. We always need new people to step up and give their lives away by investing in people.

And my life

Why give your life away when you can keep it to yourself? Because Jesus, who loves you in your fear, is worth it. Because people, in all their brokenness, are worth it. Because you want people to understand the worth of God and to see them walk in a manner that appreciates and demonstrates his worth. Because the living water, bubbling up in you, wants to flow from you.

When Peter Torjesen, as an eighteen-year-old Norwegian, heard the call to evangelize China one day, he not only emptied his wallet into the collection plate, he also included a small note with the words, "And my life."³

What about your life? Give it away.

Notes

¹ Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child* (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group), 136.

² Larry Crabb, *The Silence of Adam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 102.

³ Kari Torjesen Malcolm, *We Signed Away Our Lives* (William Carey Library, 2004).