

1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

“THE RIGHT TO BE HEARD”

My first two years of employment were rocky ones. I was 20 years old, and far from a model employee. *Hour-and-a-half lunch hours - extended breaks - allegoric reactions to overtime - never do for others what they can do themselves... Not the traits that endear you to a boss and co-workers.* I didn't realize it until later, but I had very few friends in the warehouse. Actually, my irresponsibility at work was a symptom of the rebellion in my heart. I was prideful and haughty - *and though I might've said I was a Christian* – I had never surrendered my life to Jesus. My faith was a sham.

But all that changed one Friday night. I was on my way home when I pulled off the road. I was broken, and ashamed, and needing Jesus! I knelt at a concrete picnic table, where I gave *what was left of my life* to the Lord! And from that moment on I was new! *My heart changed... My desires changed... How I saw myself changed... How I viewed my job changed...* And when I went back to work that next Monday I expected my co-workers to join in celebrating the new work that God had done in my life.

But that's not what happened. When I tried to speak up for Jesus, and tell the guys what a difference He had made in my life, *they laughed at me.* “*Man, you're lazy and irresponsible. Because you don't pull your weight it's harder on all of us... and now you're telling us how we need to live?*” My attempt to witness set off firestorm of anger. These were warehouse guys – not the most tactful communicators - and they were brutal. To them I was a hypocrite. *And I remember walking away realizing they were right!*

So I shut up. For the next year or so, I shut up and worked my buns off. I was back early from lunch. I skipped my break if necessary. I never begrudged working over to get the job done. I made a 180 degree reversal. I bent over backwards to be a good employee and serve my co-workers...*Understand, I was still zealous to tell people about Jesus,* but I knew my more immediate goal was to earn their respect. I realized that oftentimes before you convey the Gospel, you have to **earn the right to be heard.**

In 1899, a Missouri Congressman created a nickname for his State. Williard Vandiver said in a speech, “*I come from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs and Democrats, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to show me.*” And from that moment on Missouri has been known as “*the show me state.*” But I've discovered the same can be said for people everywhere... *Before some people will listen to what you say, they want to look at how you live!* The proof is in the pudding – not our “*frothy eloquence.*”

To me, this is the great need among Christians today. Certainly, we need to trumpet the Gospel truth, but first let's build a platform of integrity from which we can speak convincingly the love and truth of Jesus Christ. And let me add, this kind of witness *works!* Before I left my job both *my bosses* and *my peers saw* - and even commented - on the change in my life. They came up and asked me why? How fun it was to tell them that Jesus had made all the difference. *I eventually did get to share the Gospel at work,* but first I **earned the right.**

As a Christian you also have the Gospel. It's the power of God to salvation. It can turn your friends *from darkness to light* and *from bondage to freedom* – but are the folks around listening, *and why should they?* From all outward appearances your life is no better off than the next guy

or gal. As we've mentioned, the Gospel is always true, *whoever might be preaching it* – but a *godly messenger* brings credibility to *the message*. If we really want to reach your friends and co-workers with the love and truth of Jesus, your first step is to **earn a hearing** and **create a platform**.

This is the message in 1 Thessalonians 2. Paul writes to the believers and explains what he'd done to earn the right to bring to them the Gospel. Apparently, there were folks in Thessalonica casting a cloud of doubt over Paul's ministry. The criticism probably came from jealous Jews who'd stir up the riot we read about in Acts 17 – and forced Paul out of town.

Paul was use to being a target for lies and slander. Stuart Briscoe once described the traits of a good pastor, **“He has the mind of a scholar, the heart of a child, and the hide of a rhinoceros.”** Paul was a pastor with thick skin. He was skilled at shaking off the mudslinging and moving on. But what concerned him about the falsehoods swirling in Thessalonica were their potential effect on the church. This was a young church. Paul had been among them just a short time - maybe as little as three weeks. The Thessalonians had seen Paul's ministry in action, but few of them knew him personally. For the Gospel's sake he wants to put to rest their doubts by recalling his example. *Let me sum up 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12...*

Paul describes the **means** by which He came - He was *bold* and He was *real*... He assures them His **motive** was to *please God, not men*... His **methods** were void of *flattery, greed, fame, and coercion*... And his **model** for ministry was two-fold – he was like a *nursing mom* and a *faithful dad*. We're going to learn this morning how to **earn the right to be heard**.

Paul begins his defense, 2:1, **“For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain.”** This is always the question when I make a spiritual investment in another person... *did I do any good?* Jesus compares our job to the farmer who goes into the fields to sow seed. The Word of God is the seed and the hearts of men are the ground. But imagine a farmer throwing *invisible seed* - on *invisible ground* - then adding *invisible water* - hoping for *invisible sprouts* - that yield *invisible fruit*. No wonder there's a question mark above his efforts. Spiritual cultivation and investing in people can't always be measured with tangible results.

I'll never forget the lady who came to church one Sunday. *If looks could kill I was dead*. She kept a stiff upper lip all morning. I thought, surely my jokes would crack a smile. *Realize, I'm known for my side-splitting humor*. But this lady somehow resisted. It was like she was carved into Mount Rushmore – *talk about stone-faced!* When I mumbled, **“Amen,”** I figured I could've just as easily shouted, **“In Vain.”** I was so surprised, later that day, when her sister called to tell me she'd prayed and given her life to Jesus!

It taught me a valuable lesson! Never, ever underestimate the power of God's Word. It penetrates beneath the face - and bores down into a heart. The Gospel is a spiritual **bunker buster**. It's the heavy artillery God launches to break up *buried shelters* and slice through *hardened targets*. For a decade we thought Osama bin Laden was hiding deep within the Tora Bora Mountains of eastern Afghanistan. To get him we developed **bunker buster missiles** that could cut deep into the mountains and blow up underground shelters. But God was way ahead of the curve. Spiritually speaking that's what the Gospel has been doing for the last 2000 years.

This is why God instructed Pastor Jeremiah, “Do not be afraid of their faces.” You can’t always tell *on the face* what’s going on *in the heart*. Any time we *share the Word of God* or *show the love of God* – anytime we put the Gospel in motion - we can rest assured that it won’t be in vain. Listen to Isaiah 55:11 in the CEV. God tells us, “That’s how it is with My words. They don’t return to me without doing everything I send them to do.”

Paul’s visit to Thessalonica had not been in vain – and he recalls the day he limped into town... Verse 2, “But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict.” Paul’s trip through Macedonia was a wild ride. In Philippi he was arrested, beaten, thrown in jail. He gets to Thessalonica happy, but on a gurney *sore from head to toe*. Thessalonica was 100 miles away. Paul was hoping these folks might be a little friendlier. But again persecution raised it’s ugly head. *Jealous Jews*, and a *frenzied mob*, and *panicked officials* forced Paul to skip town in the dark of night. The Gospel was being spread, amid “*much conflict*.”

Yet how did Paul respond to the opposition? One word: **Boldness!** Note what he says, “we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel...” Rather than silence or intimidate, the hostilities Paul experienced only made him bolder! This was the characteristic of the early church in Acts. Persecuting the church was like pouring water on a grease fire – the church *flamed up* and *grew hotter*. The tougher life got the more the believers clung to Jesus and the bolder they became in their proclamation. I think when persecution takes stuff from us, and life is really all about Jesus, the Christian gets bolder... Of course, this was how Paul lived. His life was lived out on the edge. He counted everything loss for Jesus’ sake.

And who doesn’t admire this kind of fearlessness and courage? Paul’s willingness to convey the Gospel, despite the serious suffering he incurred, in both cities, *earned him the opportunity to be heard*.

Today, we see celebrity preachers and evangelists crisscrossing the nation filling stadiums and arenas. Their touring is a lucrative business. There’s the travel... the red carpet treatment... the lavish honorariums... But I wonder if the whirlwind tours wouldn’t slow down a bit if every city they visited welcomed them with a riot, and another beating, and maybe a false imprisonment. The Thessalonians could be sure Paul wasn’t in it for the wrong reasons. His ministry had cost him lacerations and broken ribs. People have to listen to us when we live boldly in the midst of conflict.

Paul adds in verse 3, “For our exhortation did not come from error or uncleanness, nor was it in deceit.” Paul wasn’t a deceiver or a manipulator. He was a straight-shooter. In a word, Paul was **authentic**. *He was real*. It reminds me of the conversation between the motorist and mechanic... Motorist: “What will you charge to repair my car?” Mechanic: “What’s wrong with your car?” Motorist: “I don’t know.” Mechanic: “\$159.95” When the guy knows *the price* before *the problem*... beware!

Yet there was nothing *dishonest* or *deceitful* or *disingenuous* about Paul’s *approach to the Thessalonians*, or his *presentation of the Gospel*. I wish I could say the same for every church today, but I can’t... Too many churches try to water down the Gospel to appeal to the latest cultural trends. They share only God’s promises, while sheltering people from the Bible’s harder demands. *Are people being told the whole story?* With faith comes repentance. As we learned last week, coming to Jesus involves turning from idols... *Paul was upfront about God’s requirements*...

I hate it whenever I hear an eager evangelist lure people into believing that becoming a Christian is going to solve all their problems. They're selling a false bill of goods. In fact, if you cheat on your income tax, or lie to your wife, becoming a Christian might just make your life harder at first. I've been to churches where everyone walked around with a phony, plastic grin on their face, as if it were a sin to be down or discouraged. People pretend to be *the ideal*, when they lack the grace to *be real*. Jesus never promised to eliminate all our problems and stresses, He only promises to join us in bearing them and empower us through them.

Because of his genuineness, Paul carried God's "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval." Verse 4 tells us, "But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts." Notice, Paul gets high marks – straight As. He was "approved by God" and "entrusted with the gospel." The implication though, *is this isn't the case for everyone*. There are people today, running around speaking for God who shouldn't be. They're not approved – not authorized – illegal. God can't trust them with the truth. And here's what earns God's endorsement... As Paul puts it, "So we speak, not as pleasing men, but God..." To gain God's approval to speak for Him, and be trusted with the Gospel - you can't be a man-pleaser.

Recently, Sports Illustrated did an article on "home field advantage." It's not a myth. It's proven. The home team is more likely to win the game. The article examined all team sports from the NFL, to Brazilian Soccer, to Japanese Baseball. And none of the factors you might've assumed, accounted for the phenomena – not *the rigors of travel*, nor *the familiarity of the surroundings*, or even *the players' reaction to the cheers and jeers of the crowd*. The one cause of home field advantage was the referee's bias. It seems that the refs or umps feel the pressure of the crowd. Nobody likes to get booed. And they respond – often unconsciously – by trying to please the people who are watching them. When the game is on the line they end up calling more fouls, or penalties, or strikes for the home team. An umpire is a trained professional. He prides himself on objectivity. But the desire to please people can be so strong it takes over under pressure.

This is why we should be careful when we represent God and share His Word. Don't soft soak a truth. Speak the truth in love, *but speak the truth*. No one, *including myself*, likes to handle controversial issues and draw unpopular conclusions - yet rubbing folks the wrong way is a common occurrence if you dare to speak God's Word. We live in a fallen world. That's why truth will challenge us to change, and change is always painful. The bottom line for us is *who do we intend to please... Men? Or God?*

In the early 1990s John Sununu served as the White House Chief of Staff under the first President Bush. One day a reporter asked Sununu if his job was a difficult one? John Sununu's reply was quick and terse, "No." The reporter thought the Chief of Staff had misunderstood the question. But the former Governor elaborated, "No, my job is very easy." Then Sununu explained, "I have only one constituent." And how true his answer was. The WH Chief of Staff's only job is to please the President. And this is how every Christian should think of his interaction with life. We have only *one constituent to serve - one person to please* – the God who made us and saved us. *This is how I think*. If I didn't I would never find the courage and nerve to do and say what's required of a faithful pastor.

I love this quote from comedian, Bill Cosby. He says, "I don't know the secret of success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody." It's true, the person who tries to please *everybody* ends up pleasing *nobody*. It's like radio stations. Imagine a station that played all genres of music... A polka song by Jimmy Dorsey... followed by some Motley Crue heavy metal... next up a rap by Jay-Z... then a Cary Underwood country... then Frank Sinatra... then Free Bird... then Beethoven's fifth symphony. *Who would listen?* Cater to *everybody* and you

please *nobody*. This is why we earn the right to be heard when we obey only God, and not the opinions of men. Human opinion is *fickle* and *fallible* and *fleeting*!

And notice Paul's **methods**... there was **no buttering up, no taking advantage, no playing to the crowd, and no pushing people around.** Verse 5, **"For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know..."** Mark Twain wrote a famous short story entitled, **"The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County."** But the author was clever. He dedicated the publication to a man named, **"John Smith."** In the credits Twain wrote, **"John Smith, who I have known in diverse and sundry places and whose many and manifold virtues did always command my esteem."** Actually, Mark Twain didn't have a single **"John Smith"** in mind with the dedication. He just knew **"John"** and **"Smith"** were the two most popular names in the English language. Twain figured if only the *John Smiths* of the world bought his publication, that alone would make it a best seller. He appealed to the human ego, and wrote the flattering dedication.

Flattery may sell a story, but it's no help communicating the Gospel. In fact, the Gospel isn't very flattering – it starts out with a dark confession, **"I've sinned."** No one is good enough for God. We're all saved by grace. The Gospel is a slap in the face to our pride. It builds us up, by first tearing us down. Try to make it palatable and tasty, and you dilute its power. Sharing the Gospel calls for *straight shooting*, not *smooth talking*.

Paul's presentation had nothing to do with flattery. Verse 5 adds, nor did he wear a **"cloak for covetousness - God is witness."** In other words, Paul wasn't after anybody's money. You see some of today's evangelists with a hand *pressing people's forehead*, and another *picking their back pocket*. Paul is thinking of a man who covers up his greediness with a façade of righteousness. There're pastors who cater to the big tithers. They preach to loosen people's purse strings, and manipulate their congregation to give.

Once, a rabbi went to get his hair cut. Afterwards, he tried to pay. That's when the barber told him, **"Rabbi, no worries. I never charge the clergy."** The next day the barber found *a loaf of Jewish rye bread* on his front steps. Later, a Catholic priest came in for a cut. Afterwards, the barber said, **"I never charge clergy."** The next morning, *a bottle of wine* was on his steps. The following day a Baptist preacher came in for a haircut. Again, the barber stated his policy, **"Preacher, no worries. I never charge for clergy."** The next morning, there were *fifteen Baptist preachers* on his door step.

Whenever we serve for Jesus' sake there should be no ulterior motive. We lose the right to be heard when people sense they're just a means to an ends. When you try to win people to Jesus *to ease your guilt* – or *put a notch in your belt* – or *fulfill your quota* – people sniff out the hypocrisy.

I'll never forget the Baptist preacher of my childhood church offering a autographed Braves baseball to the person who brought the most people to the revival. *Shame on him* for using a worldly gimmick to motivate our service the Lord. And *shame on the person who won the baseball...* *Uh, that would be me...* I'm embarrassed about it now. I didn't invite anyone before that night, and I didn't invite anyone after that night. I cared more about a silly baseball than I did *the glory of God* or *the souls of my friends*. Why wasn't love *for Jesus* and *for people* enough to motivate me? Trying to win that stupid baseball revealed my worldliness. Whenever a church or a Christian *serves God* for their *own gain* astute people turn a deaf ear to our witness. We lose the right to be heard. And same is true with fame. Paul says in verse 6, **"Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others..."** Paul's motive was pure. But there's a fine line between *serving God* and

promoting me... Have you ever done stuff for God, so you could brag about it later? I'm afraid, if the truth were known we're all guilty. We like to *appear* more spiritual than we really are. We need to rid our hearts of any vain glory.

Paul adds in verse 6, “when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.” Paul was a Jerusalem apostle – a spiritual heavyweight. He could've pulled *his apostle card*, and exercised special privileges. But Paul knew you earn a hearing by *giving up your rights* not by demanding them. Nobody listens to a bully. The leader who pushes folks around loses his influence. You *resent* a bully – you *respect* a servant. And that's especially true of a spiritual bully. Paul won a hearing with humility, and sacrifice, and being a servant to the people around him.

Paul didn't make demands. Instead, he tells us in verse 7, “We were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children.” Understand, Paul endured harsh treatment. He was beaten with rods, and pummeled with rocks, and stretched on the torture racks, and shipwrecked among the sharks... *Hard times usually make for hard men*. But not Paul, there was a gentleness about him. I've met church leaders who had *soft skin* and *hard hearts* – Paul had *tough skin*, but a *soft heart*. Paul treated new believers like a nursing mom cherishes her kids.

Verse 8, “So, affectionately longing 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 dear to us.” A mom does this for her children. She doesn't just wipe a nose, and change a diaper, and plop out so her child can feed. I've seen a mother breast feed her child. I saw it four times with my wife and kids, and it always struck me as a sacred act. It was mystical, tender, and beautiful. Trust me, a lot more was given and received than mere milk. A passing of affection - a deep exchange - occurs between a mother and her child... And Paul compares this to his love for the Thessalonians. Trust me, show people that kind of love and you'll earn their respect.

Paul says in verse 9, “For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God.” At least Paul could've expected the Thessalonians to cough up room and board. Instead, Paul supplemented his pastor job by making tents. He worked while everyone else took siesta. Paul was willing to *moonlight* so he could *spread the light!*

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery, and as was the custom on the plantation he was sold at an early age and separated from his mother. He was move 12 miles away. But most nights his mom was there to tuck him into bed. She worked the fields, then hiked 12 miles to see her son. Then she hiked back to get there before 6 AM, or risk being beaten. A mom does *whatever it takes!*... This was Paul's love for the Thessalonians. I'll bet there are folks in your life that you've written off... “*They'll never be saved. God can never reach them.*” I only want to ask, *have you loved them the way a mother loves her child - or Paul loved the Thessalonians?* If we deal with our own hard heart... maybe God will deal with theirs!

Paul has one more illustration of his love for these believers. Verse 10... “You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.” He brings up the picture of a father.

And I've learned this firsthand, *good dads* and *good pastors* have a lot in common. Paul *pastored* like he would've *parented*. Dads live a devoted life. They keep *commitments* and have *convictions*. They treat people fair and just. They avoid even the smell of sin. They weed out the shady areas of their own lives so that there's nothing left for their kids to stumble over. And this was how Paul interacted with the Thessalonians. He was a dad these people could respect – *no double standards, no hidden compromise*. They could look at his life and say for certain, "This is the right way to go."

And notice the activity of a father in a child's life... What is a dad? He's an example! But what does he do? He "exhorts... comforts... charges..." Here's what this means... He "exhorts" or corrects. This involves spanking a kid's bottom. He "comforts" or encourages. This will include a pat on his child's back. And he "charges" or challenges. Here's where you'll see this dad taking his child by the hand and leading him forward. Here's where a dad should be... In his kid's face when he's wrong. By his kid's side when he's weak. And a step ahead when it's time to move.

And this is also the job of a person like Paul who's invested spiritually in the people around him. There are times when we need to correct folks, and times to encourage, and other times when we should challenge each other. *Pastoring God's kids* and *parenting your kids* go hand in hand.

Once, a native shared his testimony with his missionary friend, "You built a bridge of love from your heart to my heart – and Jesus walked over." Is there a person you know who's heard the Gospel time after time, yet never received. Maybe it's time you built a bridge. Be bold. You don't even have to say a word at first. Just build a bridge, and Jesus will walk over!