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small group material



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Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Labourers

SINCERELY, PAUL • A Discipler's Love

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

1 Thessalonians 2:1-6

While it seems clear that the church in Thessalonica is healthy and growing, there seems to be evidence that some in the church had sought to undermine Paul's authority by casting doubt about the sincerity of his love and commitment to the church he founded. This portion of Scripture presents Paul's defense of the sincerity of his love.

Paul begins by telling them that his initial visit to Thessalonica was no accident. Apparently, one of the rumors circulating was that Paul had never really intended to visit the city. Paul's first defense of his commitment to them is reminding them of the sacrifice and risk he endured in telling them the gospel. As one traces the story in Acts 16, no more than a week prior to his visit, Paul had been severely beaten in Phillipi. He was probably still physically recovering when he arrived. Still aching from a severe beating for his faith, Paul risks his life, and proclaims the gospel in Thessalonica. Paul's reasoning here seems to be "Would I have done this by accident, and would I have risked so much, if I really didn't love you?"

As the chapter progresses, we can begin to better construct what some of these allegations were against Paul. Apparently, he was being accused of being nothing more than a religious charlatan who had won over the hearts of the Thessalonians in an attempt to financially profit from them. One could well see why Paul would be hurt by such a rumor. He asks the Christians to remember how he had never used flattery, but rather told people the truth, even if it was hard to hear. Paul's point is that you know someone really loves you if they are willing to tell you hard things: telling you truth for your good, rather than flattery, which is selfishly motivated.

1 Thessalonians 2:7-8

Here, Paul makes two more points to back up his claim that he loves them sincerely. He brings to their remembrance how he nurtured them and sacrificially cared for them like a mother cares for her children. Next, he reminds them of how he opened up his own life to them, and was vulnerable as he lived among them. Vulnerability is a hallmark of sincerity - giving others an invitation to enter your life, even as you have entered their lives.

1 Thessalonians 2:9-12

In this section, Paul adds three more closing points to his argument. First, he tells them that he worked to support himself, choosing not to take money or handouts from them. This fact alone seems sufficient to undercut his detractors. Paul is basically asking, "If my motive was greed in coming to you, why didn't I ever take or ask for anything?" Next, he calls to mind the manner of life he lived among them. He lived a holy and blameless life before them so as to not leave room for anyone to doubt his integrity. Finally, he builds on the mothering metaphor by adding that he also acted as a loving father toward them, urging and encouraging them to live holy lives.

What's the Big Idea?

The life and love of a disciple should be as selfless, sincere and sacrificial as the Savior we believe and proclaim.

What's the Problem?

Our love for others is often tainted by impure and selfish motives.

In discipleship and evangelism, we're tempted to say what people want to hear instead of what they need to hear.





Summary

We can follow this passage on multiple levels. And as this is often true in Scripture it might be helpful to draw each of them out for you:

The first level observes the argument Paul makes for his integrity and his deep and sincere love for the believers. Here we're just looking to understand clearly the points Paul is making in His defense.

The second level sees in Paul's description of his ministry, some very practical ways we can love, encourage, and disciple other Christians: a manual for love and discipleship, if you will. At this level we see a model of how we should be.

The third level just looks at the information from the second level very, very personally. In other words, where am I manipulative, less than sincere, flattering, self-centered, unwilling to sacrifice, etc. in my relationships? Here's how we respond from the heart at this level of reading:

First, we courageously listen and reflect, inviting the Lord to show us where our hearts are bent.

As the Lord points, probes and prods, our next response is repentance. This is pretty reflexive when the Lord points to an area needing change - "Oh Lord, forgive me, change me!"

The fourth level is looking for the solution to our problem: "how" or "what" needs to change. Sometimes the change is one of attitude or perspective, which is often transformed by going through the first three levels of observation.

When it comes to heart, sin and behavior issues, you want to be looking in the direction of Jesus for the solution or changes. "Just say 'no' to sin!" doesn't work very well as a non-Christian and doesn't work much better as Christian because our hearts, wills and minds are still bent. Rather, we look to Jesus for our help. We can do this in a variety of way. If a way is not specific or clear in the text, we may come to Him in any and all of these ways and more:

We may come to Him for forgiveness: to be cleansed from where we've sinned.

We may come to Him in worship and thanksgiving allowing Him to transform and change our thinking.

We may come to Him and ask Him to help us to truly repent and forsake a sin?

We may come to Him in the form of His body (other believers) to confess and pray and gain encouragement and accountability from other believers.

We may come to Him for wisdom: why we act the way we act, who might be able to help us, etc.

We may realize we have failed to trust in Him in some way (His love or care) and so we turn back to Him and embrace Him in these ways.

We may come to Him seeking special empowerment, healing or grace.

We may come to Him reflecting on all that He has done for us and given to us, reflecting on who we are in Christ. Who we are as God's children.

This list is not meant to be comprehensive but forms a basic guideline for the many ways in which we come to Christ with our sin problem. The important thing is we come to Him, and don't seek to engineer the changes on our own.

What's Our Response?

Most of the studies in Thessalonians attempt to bring out a redemptive response as well as a ministry response.

Personal Response: You want the group to clearly see what a sincere and selfless love looks like.

They will not have to stare at this picture long before seeing some aspects of their motives that need forgiveness and transformation. This is why they need Christ, and not simply to "act" more loving.

It would be fruitful to discuss the list of different ways we come to Christ with our sin. You want them to run to Christ for a solution to their sin.

Ministry Response: Through studying the passage there will be obvious applications the group will make reflexively: they'll see something Paul did and realize they don't.

As the leader what you want in the last question is for people to desire to disciple someone. The question attempts to make this specific: "Who could you disciple?"

You will want to share with them, if they don't know, how to begin such a discipleship relationship. There is information on this in the discipleship tool *The Compass*.

What Are the Questions?

I Thessalonians 2:1-12

LAUNCH

When have you seen someone who truly lived out what they believed (it could be politically, athletically, academically, etc.). Why would you say that they truly lived it out? What defines an authentic person?

EXPLORE

Read I Thessalonians 2:1-12.

1. Reread 2:1-6. Paul is clearly trying to defend the sincerity of his commitment to the Thessalonians. Can you figure out what some of the accusations might have been against Paul?
 2. Read Acts 16:16-24. This event most likely happened within a week of preaching at Thessalonica. How do you think Paul felt coming into Thessalonica? How does this prove the sincerity of his heart?
 3. Paul states that God has “entrusted him with the gospel.” Entrusted to do what? Was there anything about Paul that led God to entrust the gospel with him? How does one become entrusted with the gospel?
 4. In verses 3-6, what motivations and pressures could have easily caused Paul to distort or bend the gospel message? In what ways might we be tempted to bend certain aspects of the gospel today?
 5. In what ways could you say that Paul’s life, love and calling to ministry reflected the very essence of the gospel?
 6. In 2:5, Paul strangely proves the sincerity of his love by claiming he never told them flattering things. What’s the logic of this?
 7. God calls us to love people enough to tell them hard, but true things, to help them grow. What was the best, but hardest thing a Christian brother or sister told you? How about that you’ve told someone else?
 8. How do you know when to tell someone such truth?
- Reread 2:7-12.
9. In verse 7, Paul uses the metaphor of a mother in describing his discipleship. What are some of the ideas conveyed by this image?
 10. Paul says that he loved them so much he was delighted to share “not only the gospel but their very lives” (v. 8). How does Paul’s vulnerability prove his love?
 11. In verse 9-12, there are several defenses in these passages for Paul’s authentic love for his disciples in Thessalonica. What are they?
 12. What do you see as the differences between urging, encouraging, and comforting?
 13. As you think of all of the ways Paul helped his disciples to grow, how would you best accomplish the following:
 - Help a spiritually young believer continue to grow?
 - Help a mature believer who is quite unaware of an area of sin or immaturity in their life?
 - Help someone trapped in sin but can’t seem to get out?
 - Help someone aware of their sin but doesn’t seem to care?
 - Help a believer who has no one to help them to grow?

APPLY

14. When you consider the selfless, other-centered, sacrificial and sincere nature of true love, where do you feel the greatest sense of conviction?
15. How do you think Paul depended upon Christ to keep his motives pure? When you sense you’re not measuring up to God’s standards, how do you bring Christ into it?
16. Does this passage inspire you to have any specific conversations with anyone? How does it make you want to disciple differently?
17. Specifically, what believers do you know that don’t have, but need, someone like Paul in their life? How can you begin to fill that need?

What Are the Answers?

1. Probably all the things that were true of the false teachers accusing him: that his ministry was a manipulative scam to make money - he was using them.
2. Paul was probably still healing from the beating he received in Phillipi. He was probably considering the distinct possibility that this could happen again. Such a willingness to sacrifice does not flow from impure motives.
3. He was entrusted to guard and proclaim the gospel. All of us have been entrusted with the gospel.
4. The pressure to make the gospel sound more attractive, tell people what they wanted to hear, not offend, take away the exclusive claims of Christ as the only way, etc.
5. It was selfless, sincere and sacrificial like the gospel he proclaimed. His ministry was God's undeserved grace. Discuss.
6. Telling someone hard truth is done from a selfless desire to see them grow. Flattery can often be used with a selfish motive: wanting others to think more fondly of you.
7. Allow the group to discuss.
8. Allow the group to share.
9. It carries the idea of nurturing and nourishing young Christians in the faith. It is also the picture of tender care and selfless service.
10. When you share your life and struggles with others, it invites them to be open with you, and helps them experience grace.
11. He worked and never took a handout. He urged, encouraged and comforted like a father. He modeled a holy life.
12. Urging is pushing someone along who needs a shove. Encouraging is running alongside someone. Comforting is helping someone who has fallen.
13. Young Christians need to be nourished. Mature believers who are unaware of blind spots, need someone to graciously tell them the truth. Someone who is trapped in sin requires vulnerability from your own life. Someone who doesn't care, needs truth put rather bluntly. When you see someone who could benefit by being disciplined, it's important to initiate a relationship.
14. Allow the group to discuss.
15. See the last section of the notes. It would be fruitful to discuss the list of different ways that we come to Christ with our sin.
16. Allow the group to discuss.
17. You want to make sure the group members have an idea of how they would initiate a discipleship relationship.

Memorize

We speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.

I Thessalonians 2:4