

Gentle and Boldly: Sharing Gospel and Life
1 Thessalonians 2:1–12
May 8, 2022

Toddlers can do a lot of remarkable things, but not these: they won't make a parent's life easier, or their time more efficient. Having a toddler likely won't advance your career, make your budget more flexible, or cause your social life to thrive. In fact, to put it bluntly, toddlers get in the way of every bit of that. Kids eventually give, yes, but not before they take. Children eventually contribute, yes, but not before they cost. So, for many in our society, if toddlers, tweens, or teenagers have a knack for limiting my efficiency, strangling my budget, stressing my career, and/or inhibiting my social life, then by all means *don't* sign me up.¹

While I'm sure there are exceptions to this statement, the general rule is that faithful parenting is a highly unselfish act. To mother, or to be a faithful father, demands laying down your wishes, your time, your goals, for the betterment of another. Of course, this is one of the reasons abortion is so ghastly. At root, it puts on display an unfettered selfishness that attempts to justify murdering the most vulnerable. It declares, in essence, "Your life for mine."²

Faithful parenting is a highly unselfish act because children's needs just keep on coming. Maybe it looks like preparing and serving a meal *as if* you didn't just clean up the previous one. Or like calming the cry of a little girl that spotted a terrifying fly. Or like a baby screaming in the middle of the night for the third week in a row. Regardless of what it looks like, it's as if every day children storm the beaches of our selfishness. Faithful moms and dads meet thousands and thousands of needs, without pomp or fanfare, often without thanks, and almost always for the benefit of another.

What's this have to do with 1 Thessalonians 2? In Acts 17, the Apostle Paul had been run out of Thessalonica quickly by those that opposed his message. And, then, some of those enemies began a smear campaign.³ They took advantage of his disappearance, accusing him of deceiving others with his message, and further, of having impure motives in delivering that message. Charlatans abounded in the ancient world. To these detractors, Paul was just the latest.

And how does Paul answer them? He asserts that nothing he did in Thessalonica served his own ends. And he makes his case—his defense—by appealing to illustrations from the family, in particular the way parents' self-sacrificial posture aims at the good of their own children. Because in Thessalonica Paul shared the gospel of God—and his own life—for the purpose of God, the good of the Thessalonians. Note first,

1. Sharing the Gospel of God Boldly (vv. 1–4)

In the first chapter of this letter, Paul expressed how the word of the Lord had **sounded forth** from the Thessalonians. The effects of the gospel had not only been clear in Thessalonica, Paul writes that **in every place their faith toward God had gone forth**. Other churches knew these former pagans had **turned to God from idols**. The Thessalonian church became known for looking to Jesus, He who'd risen from the dead, the One **who rescues us from the wrath to come** (1 Thess. 1:8–10).

In other words, the conversion of the Thessalonians was far from "under the radar." In the middle of fervent opposition, the Lord worked through Paul. Which is how chapter two begins. Paul

¹ In a form of narcissistic societal procrastination, birth rates plummet. And the effects of societies indulging themselves, sacrificing the future for their own present, dot the history of civilization.

² I don't know where I heard this first, but Bethany Jenkins says it here: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/whats-it-like-to-abort-your-own-child/>

³ John Stott, *The Gospel and the End of Time*, 45.

writes in verse 1: **For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain.** This verse is strikingly parallel to what he'd just said in 1:9. The major difference is that in chapter 1 Paul's describing how *other* churches—fellowships in Macedonia and Achaia and elsewhere—knew of their faith in God. *Here* he's saying, in essence, "Of course, they know in part, but you know what God did better than anyone."⁴ Paul's proclamation was not empty in purpose⁵ nor in effect. Their coming—Paul and his fellow gospelizers—led to continuing results.⁶

Even though the circumstances were challenging. Verse 2: **But after we had already suffered and been mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition.** I can't overstate how helpful studying the book of Acts has been for my grasp of Paul's epistles. In this case, when he describes his suffering and mistreatment at Philippi, we recall Acts 16. The lies. The beatings. The stocks. Without a trial, he'd been humiliated.⁷ Indignities had been heaped upon him.⁸ Though God delivered him, the mob had done its work.

Was Acts 17 in Thessalonica vastly different than Philippi? Did Paul roll up like he was at the Met Gala, red carpet and adoring throngs? Acts 17:5 says no: **But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the marketplace, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar.** 1 Thessalonians 2:2 agrees, describing their work being **amid much opposition.** Just like at Philippi, there was considerable antagonism in Thessalonica.⁹

Nonetheless, what did Paul do? Verse 2 again: **But after we had already suffered and been mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition.** Note a couple important phrases. First, he spoke the **gospel of God.** Acts 17 helps us again, describing his message: **for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ"** (Acts 17:2–3). He explained the gospel *of God*, meaning, it was God's message Paul proclaimed. He'd sent Jesus. And then He'd sent Paul to tell others that this Jesus was the Christ. In Thessalonica, some were persuaded.

That Jesus asked over 300 questions in the Gospels. And I think the most important one is this, the one recorded in Luke 9:20: **Who do you say that I am?** And if that's the most important question Jesus asked, it's the most important question ever asked. If your answer is "meh, who cares?" then let me encourage you to think about it for more than 10 seconds. The gospel of God says He's the Christ, the Messiah, the One whose wounds heal.

Paul boldly proclaimed that message, the **gospel of God.** It was God's message. And he did it in God's power. See the prepositional phrase in verse 2: **we had the boldness in our God to speak.** That's the source of Paul's boldness. It wasn't intrinsic to him. It's God's gospel. And it's shared in His power. Are you hesitant to speak? Ask for the Spirit's aid.

Paul writes in verse 3: **For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit.** Maybe you say, "That's a hard left, Paul. Where'd that statement come from?" Keep in mind the smear campaign being advanced against him. After being run out of town by the Greek mob, some likely asserted that he'd delivered his message with impure motives.¹⁰ Based on verses 5

⁴ Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, TNTC, 42.

⁵ Stott, 47.

⁶ That's the sense of the perfect tense verb. See Morris, 42 or Charles Wanamaker, *The Epistle to the Thessalonians*, NIGTC, 92.

⁷ Stott, 46.

⁸ Morris, 43.

⁹ Wanamaker, 93.

¹⁰ G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, IVPNTC, 66.

and 6 mentioning greed and self-glory, we might guess those belonged to the theories put forward. Paul will address the glory in verses 7–8, and the greed in verses 9–12. But before we get there, what glory was there in being bloodied and locked in the stocks at Philippi? Is greed why he worked night and day to support himself? Concerning deceit, did Paul conceal the costs of discipleship? Did he bait and switch?

If he didn't come with impure motives, what motivated Paul? He answers in verse 4: **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.** He's not ultimately worried about the tactics of the unbelieving world. He's concerned with—motivated by—the pleasure of the One who sees and examines our hearts. Being **approved by God**, he'd been tested and found genuine as one might examine the veracity of a coin.¹¹ While Paul speaks as if this approval was something that happened in his past,¹² he doesn't write as if it stayed there. His God *continues* to examine hearts. For Paul, this testing aimed at one purpose: to entrust him with the gospel, so that He might speak—not for the applause of crowds in Philippi or Thessalonica—but for the pleasure of the One that sees all.

Back in 2008, the first time I ever preached at South Woods, I told the fictional story of a young pianist whom many considered to be the next great virtuoso. Coupling his great skill with the premiere of a piano concerto brought about a buzz in his cultured town. Tickets sold out months in advance. Of course the weeks leading up to the premiere demanded late nights and grueling practice sessions for this young prodigy and his seasoned teacher. The night of the concert, men and women in their finest attire showed up in droves. He did not disappoint, captivating them with dynamic nuance, exquisite technique, and sweeping expression. Each movement of the concerto seemed to be impossibly performed better than the last. Finally after the triumphant ending, the virtuoso eased his foot off the pedal to hear one second of silence. Then, in perfect unity, the crowd erupted with deafening applause. The young man bowed and stepped off stage. As the crowd's roar continued its crescendo, the stage hand said, "Young man, you better go out there and take another bow." But the boy hung his head and muttered, "Everyone's not standing." The stage hand peeked and, sure enough, there was one man—surrounded by standing admirers—sitting down in the upper deck. The stage hand said to the prodigy, "Listen, that's just some grumpy fella. Who cares what he thinks?!" And the young pianist replied, "That man is my teacher. His approval is all that matters."

Are we living with that kind of God-awareness, as if we're living before the face of God? Paul's motives weren't impure. He lived for the purest one, the pleasure of his God. Because of that, he could speak the gospel of God boldly. Note secondly,

2. Sharing the Gospel of God and Our Lives Gently (vv. 5–8)

Paul continues in verse 5: **For you know we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness.** Paul moves from speaking more broadly to addressing specifically what they'd done when he and his co-workers arrived in Thessalonica.¹³ Principally, Paul didn't come to use people for his own advantage. He wouldn't flatter them, attempting to gain influence for selfish ends.¹⁴ Nor did he have some sort of pretext, masking his true motivation: profit. In fact, the One that sees Paul's heart—the One before whom he lived—is called as his witness. Paul wasn't seeking fortune. Nor was he pursuing fame. Verse 6: **Nor did we**

¹¹ Stott, 50.

¹² The perfect passive tense means it had ongoing results.

¹³ Wanamaker, 96.

¹⁴ Stott, 51.

seek glory from men, either from you or for others. He didn't speak to please men nor, ultimately, for their praise.

To prove this, he sets up a contrast. As an apostle, if he'd thrown his weight around, might people have followed the whims of his influence?¹⁵ I'm sure many would have. With the influence he already had, it wouldn't be hard to draw men after himself. Nor would it be hard to use people for his own purposes. Paul acknowledges this in verse 6: **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 what did they do? Rather than taking advantage, here's the contrast: rather than being selfish, they did the opposite. Rather than having impure motives, they had the opposite. Paul uses an image to help us grasp it. Verse 7: **But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.**

Paul wasn't brash, needlessly authoritarian, or self-serving. He was gentle with them, as a nursing mother might be with a child. Beale says the term was used to describe a mother bird caring for her newborn young or her eggs.¹⁶ Right outside our kitchen window is a downspout off our back-porch gutter. And a month or so back, we saw that a bird had built a nest right on top of it. It was a perfect spot. From above it was protected by the roofline, from one side it was protected by the porch post, and in eleven years in our house I've never seen squirrels in-between that downspout and the post. Smart momma bird. And so, from the spot I make my coffee I could see things develop. We watched the bird sit there for extended periods of time, maybe we'd call that "nesting." And then one day when the mother wasn't there, I thought I could see movement in the nest. I had. And, then, for days and days we saw the momma bird fly off and then come back with something in her beak. Over and over and over and over. Beale writes of the image of the mother bird: "She conforms her life to meet the needs of the new lives of her young, just like human mothers do."¹⁷

That means sustenance. The babies wouldn't live without their mom. That also means protection.¹⁸ My kids wanted me to get a picture of the baby birds. Maybe I wanted one too. So, since I always have a ladder handy, I pulled one over close to the nest. But before I climbed up there to get a shot, what do you think I did? I looked around to make sure that momma bird wasn't watching. She would've kamikazed me.

The picture in verse 7 is of a nurse taking care of a needy child. And the one who nurses is also the mother. Why does Paul choose this image? Do moms serve their kids because they're greedy? Are they looking for personal gain? Not the moms I know. They rearrange their lives for the good of their children. They sacrifice. They pour themselves out. I like to remind my kids from time to time if they get mouthy, "Do you know how many times your mother has saved your life? How many times she slept on the floor? Or didn't sleep? Do you know how many times she's chosen your good over her own? You don't remember, maybe, but I do. And you can't count that high." Paul wasn't out for self-serving. He was gentle among them, providing for them, protecting them, **as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.**

And, generally, mothers are gentle toward—and tenderly care for—their babies because, "How could they do otherwise?" They've been wired to care. Further, their affections demand it. What they hold, protect, and care for, they love. Verse 8: **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,**

¹⁵ Beale's language, 70.

¹⁶ Beale, 73.

¹⁷ Beale, 73.

¹⁸ Wanamaker, 101.

because you had become very dear to us. It's possible that **having so fond an affection** was language common to the context of the ancient nursery. The rare word is found on a fourth-century gravestone describing the love of parents for their child.¹⁹ And if he's using that level of language, of course they didn't merely share a message and then duck back into their ivory tower. They weren't aloof. They weren't too busy. They shared the gospel of God *and* their own lives.

This would've included the inner emotional life of Paul.²⁰ He hasn't walled himself off. He cared deeply for them, for their endurance in the faith. In fact, he'll write in the next chapter these words: **For now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord** (1 Thess. 3:8). I found Leon Morris' application apt: "There is an intensity of expression here which we should note, for much of our service is of that tepid sort which keeps our innermost self to ourself. It may be this is at the root of much modern ineffectiveness."²¹

Like many in our day, I've lately become interested in Elon Musk. So last week I listened to an interview with him. The guy is certainly fascinating.²² One thing I didn't know was how—when the ramp up for the Tesla Model 3 was sputtering along with difficulty—Musk slept on the floor of the company's vehicle assembly plant. In this interview, he even alluded to needing to be out of the ivory tower, wanting his employees to know he was *with* them, suffering along during their long hours. That's admirable. His drive and leadership are impressive. He slept on the couch in his office rather than going back to the hotel. He once wore the same clothes for five consecutive days.

It was a fascinating interview. I was impressed. And then later in the week, studying this text, I thought: Elon should interview a new mom. You slept on the floor? She didn't sleep. And, as impressive as you are, she puts herself through that kind of thing to no monetary advantage. It's selfless, both in act and in motive. As was Paul. He shared the gospel of God and he poured out his life. Why? The end of verse 8: **because you had become very dear to us.**

The world was antagonistic toward the church. So Paul had to share boldly. But, surely, the church was weary of the world's antagonism. So Paul lived with them gently, tenderly caring as a nursing mother. We not only share the gospel, we share our lives. And we do so with God's end in mind.

3. Sharing the Gospel of God and Our Lives for His Purpose (vv. 9–12)

Before he gets to the purpose, Paul continues to remind 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 the gospel of God.** Have I mentioned that Paul wasn't in it for selfish motives? In fact, rather than throw his weight around and ask for monetary support, he labored night and day as a tentmaker to provide for his own needs. Would that have made his life harder? Absolutely. But do parents rely on children to support them? No, parents sacrifice and labor so that their children might be provided for.

Verse 10 continues Paul's defense. He reminds them of his actions, and again calls some to the stand: **You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers.** While it's probably best not to distinguish too sharply, John Stott writes that "devoutly" referred to their relationship toward God, "uprightly" referred to their

¹⁹ Beale, 73.

²⁰ Wanamaker, 102.

²¹ Morris, 50.

²² "Elon Musk talks Twitter, Tesla and how his brain works" — live at TED2022:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdZZpaB2kDM>

dealings with neighbors, and “blamelessly” to their public reputation.²³ However we slice it, Paul’s not afraid to call God as his witness. Not unlike the Acts 21 passage we saw last week, the charges against him were bogus.

He’s working toward the purpose of it all, but not before one more familial illustration. Verse 11: **just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children.** One of the joys—and stressors—in my life every spring is helping coach baseball. While no one would confuse my baseball knowledge with that of Tony LaRussa, I’ve learned that what 9 and 10-year-olds need most is encouragement.²⁴ So, when they’re standing in the batter’s box a coach dare not say, “Hey, this kid throws hard. And he’s wild. You don’t want to get hit. That’s gonna hurt!” You say that and they’ll strike out. But, if you lean down and say, “Hey, I’ve seen you in the cage. I’ve thrown to you. You know who oughta be scared? That ball.” So, I say that kind of thing to Collin, then to Austen, then to Jett, then to Maddox, then to Graham, and eventually I say it to my own 10-year-old. Now, when he steps in the on-deck circle, do I mean it more? Absolutely. Because I’ve seen him in the cage more. And I love him more. Generally, fathers exhort and encourage their own with the most fervent of terms, and with the most ardent motives. And that’s the comparison Paul makes.

And finally, Paul describes the purpose of all this²⁵ in verse 12: **so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.** Paul shared the gospel of God, and shared his life—sacrificing, encouraging, exhorting, and imploring—so that the Thessalonians might walk in a manner worthy of their God. That’s his aim.

Is that why we encourage, exhort, and share our lives?

That was Paul’s aim because it was the aim of the One who’d sent him. His labor and proclamation was not in vain, ultimately, because he wasn’t making it alone. Paul would write to another church that when he spoke, it’s **as though God were making an appeal through us** (2 Cor. 5:20). The same theology is here. In verse 12, Paul sets free the calling of God from *merely* something in our past. He exhorts as a father, gently as a caring mother, so that they **would walk in a manner worthy of the God who** (present tense) **calls you.** He calls so that we might walk. He keeps calling. We keep walking.

Note one more vital aspect of this passage. Back in verse 7, the image is of a nursing mother that tenderly cares for **her own children.** In verse 11, the image is of a father that implores **his own children.** And in verse 12 *the reality* is of a God who calls into **His own kingdom.**

Conclusion

Paul spoke of this kingdom—knew of its rule—because he knew its Ruler. This King—having unparalleled glory—had not used it to His own advantage. He’d not exploited. Instead, He’d shared His life, leveraging His advantage by pouring Himself out, emptying Himself for the good of others (Phil. 2). Paul was gentle because he was following this King—his King—the most gentle Man that ever lived.

Would living like that make Paul’s life easier? We’ve read Acts. We know the answer. Yet, our life for others is the posture of God’s people. Because His life for ours is the gospel of God.

²³ Stott, 53.

²⁴ Baseball needs a lot of Barnabas.

²⁵ Beale, 75. The aim of the exhortation, according to Wanamaker, 107.