

Lesson 3

Paul's Arrival and Ministry in Thessalonica

1 Thessalonians 2; Acts 17:1-10

Introduction

The opening of 1 Thessalonians 2 serves as Paul's defense of his ministry as an apostle. Like other places, Thessalonica had its critics and opponents of Christianity – and one way they attempted to win was to discredit its leaders. Many Judaizing teachers sought to bind certain aspects of the old law to Christianity. Suppose these enemies to the cross could somehow plant doubt in the minds of the Thessalonians regarding Paul's character and integrity. In that case, they might gain a foothold in persuading them to follow another gospel. It was not only Judaizing teachers in this group. It probably included unbelieving Jews and Gentiles who had become very opposed to the gospel.

The middle part of the first century found the Greco-Roman world saturated with all sorts of religious cults and systems of philosophy. With the advancement of Roman roads and merchant trade, eastern traditions merged with the West, combining principles of piety and morality with superstition and license. Blended with the tolerance and indifference of the Roman age, oriental mysteries, Greek philosophy, and local religious experts competed for the spotlight. Leon Morris writes:

“Holy Men” of all creeds and countries, popular philosophers, magicians, astrologers, crack-pots, and cranks; the sincere and the spurious, the righteous and the rogue, swindlers and saints, jostled and clamored for the attention of the credulous and the skeptical.⁷

It appears these false teachers were on the verge of having success. So, Paul spends a little time asserting that when he and his group of teachers came to them, it was with the highest standards of morality and authenticity.

1 Thessalonians 2 divides into three main sections:

1. 2:1-6: Essentials to Spiritual Leadership
2. 2:7-10: Spiritual Leadership in Action
3. 2:13-16: Contrast Between the Thessalonians and the Jewish Teachers
4. 2:17-20: Paul's Love for the Thessalonians

2:1-6 - Essentials to Spiritual Leadership

Paul begins his defense by reminding his readers of the effectiveness of his message. What they delivered to the Thessalonians was powerful and far-reaching. It changed their lives. Its fruit bore witness to its effectiveness. What made his work effective?

2:2 – Tenacity

Paul knew God stood behind him. He trusted in God's power. Therefore, he could preach without fear. He spoke with boldness and courage despite the fact his enemies would vigorously and violently resist

him. This had already happened to him in Philippi, Acts 16:16-24, where he and Silas had suffered physical and emotional harm. They were humiliated and abused, having been cast into prison – all while guilty of no crime. Acts 17 records their experience in Thessalonica, where they were accused of insurrection and threatened by a mob. These giant obstacles did not deter them from the mission. Instead, they trusted in the delivering power of God. With everything in his heart, Paul believed that God would protect him.

In the face of opposition, like Paul and his companions, the faithful servant of God relies on God's power and remains steadfast in his calling. Dedicated preachers and teachers acknowledge the challenges of confronting sin with truth but find confidence in God's supreme authority.

2:3 – Integrity

The apostle Paul's confidence in God's power came from his unwavering dedication to God's truth, which is evident in his preaching and lifestyle. Despite facing persecution aimed at destroying his credibility, Paul remained resolute. Paul emphasized the urgency and sincerity of his preaching, assuring his audience that his ministry was free from error or false teaching.

Many religious charlatans exploited sexual perversion to gain followers in the first-century religious world, but Paul vehemently denied such accusations. He rejected any suggestion of impure motives, emphasizing his dedication to honesty and integrity in his ministry. His commitment to truth, purity, and honesty distinguished him from those who sought personal gain through deception.

2:4a – Authority

Paul had not appointed himself to preach; his ministry was by divine approval. His encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, Acts 9:1-18, shows that it was God-ordained. He was entrusted with the gospel and commissioned by God to bear His name before various audiences, Acts 9:15. Throughout his epistles, Paul reiterated his understanding of this divine commission, acknowledging the grace and authority bestowed upon him to preach the gospel. Paul saw himself as a servant under God's call, command, and authority, tasked with significant responsibilities such as preaching, establishing churches, and writing Scripture. His approval by God affirmed his divine commission and empowered him to fulfill his ministry with confidence in God's blessing.

2:4b-5 - Accountability

Paul felt a deep sense of responsibility towards God, which balanced his authority to preach. This responsibility stemmed from his awareness that God, being all-knowing, scrutinized his every intention and action. Paul emphasized his accountability not to people but to God, especially when addressing accusations of being a people pleaser by false teachers in Galatia⁸. He robustly defended his stance, asserting that he aimed to serve God, not to seek human approval. This was evident in his denunciation of those corrupting the Gospel. Paul's commitment to pleasing God was driven by his understanding that God evaluates the sincerity of one's heart, the place where thoughts, feelings, decisions, and motives unite. This divine scrutiny inspired Paul's dedication to his ministry.

In his dealings with the Thessalonians, he aimed to prove his actions were not motivated by flattery or greed. Paul highlighted his commitment to honesty, referencing biblical admonitions against flattery and greed to contrast his ministry with false teachers who sought personal gain through deceitful practices. He did not pursue material rewards through his preaching, pointing to his manual labor as evidence of his self-sufficiency and dedication to serving without exploiting others. Ultimately, Paul's actions and motives were transparent before God, to whom he held himself accountable.

2:6 - Humility

Paul distinctively did not pursue the admiration or acclaim from people that many spiritual deceivers sought. His actions and teachings consistently reflected a desire for eternal glory rather than temporal recognition. Unlike typical leaders who might leverage their authority for personal gain, Paul and his fellow apostles prioritized glorifying God above all, demonstrating a unique blend of authority, accountability, and humility.

The five essential qualities⁹ just mentioned, i.e., tenacity stemming from a deep trust in God's power; integrity rooted in a commitment to God's truth, divinely sanctioned authority; accountability with an awareness of God's omniscient oversight, and humility driven by a focus on glorifying God, are marks of godly leadership. These qualities highlight a model that is immune to failure if we trust God's plan.

2:7-12 - Spiritual Leadership in Action

What does effective spiritual leadership look like? It blends personal virtues with practical actions. In these verses, Paul uses practical principles to describe the nurturing roles of a leader, choosing the intimate and powerful images of a mother and father to illustrate the care and guidance leaders should offer.

These principles, used across his epistles, demonstrate the depth of spiritual care and personal investment required of leaders. First, Paul likened himself to a mother, laboring for his followers' spiritual birth and maturity, and then to a father, a source of spiritual life, teaching, and protection. Through these familiar images, Paul describes the affectionate and dedicated relationship a spiritual leader should have in the local church, emphasizing the nurturing and protective roles essential for building spiritual growth and maturity.

2:7-9: The Imagery of a mother

Gentleness

We were gentle among you, as a nurse nurtures her own children (2:7).

Paul contrasts his actions with those of false teachers by emphasizing his gentle approach toward the Thessalonians, distinguishing himself from deceitful and exploitative behaviors. Being "gentle" implies kindness, acceptance, respect, compassion, tolerance, patience, tenderheartedness, and loyalty. Paul and his fellow preachers aimed to sincerely serve the Thessalonians with these virtues, just like that of a nursing mother—deeply personal, nurturing, and warm. Rather than using people to achieve personal

ambitions, showcased a model of leadership characterized by tender love rather than harshness or indifference.

Genuine Affection

We cared so much for you... (2:8a).

What was the underlying motivation for his gentle care for the Thessalonians? Love. He shared a deep, passionate affection for them, akin to a mother's natural bond and longing for her child. Paul suggests that this kind of affection, while naturally found in mothers, is also divinely instilled¹⁰ in the hearts of Christians as they serve.

Sacrificial Love

You had become dear to us... (2:8b).

His dedication to the Thessalonians was much more than a sense of duty for Paul. He and his companions found great joy in sharing the gospel, a task that was an eager outpouring of their love. Paul, Silas, and Timothy didn't just convey teachings; they shared their lives with the Thessalonians in a deep, personal sacrifice. This is the essence of how leaders are to care—deeply cherished, individual, and full of affection for the people they serve.

Dedicated Work

You remember our labor and hardship, ... working night and day so that we would not burden any of you, we preached God's gospel to you (2:9).

Here, Paul mentions "labor and hardship," with "labor" highlighting the challenges of their tasks and "hardship" the effort and struggle involved. They did so without looking for something in return. They were eager to serve, driven by a genuine desire to imitate Jesus rather than by personal gain.

2:10-12: The Imagery of a Father

An Example

You are witnesses, and so is God, of how devoutly, righteously, and blamelessly we conducted ourselves with you believers (2:10).

Leaders, including fathers, are expected to lead by example and embody virtuous integrity within their families and the church. Paul urged them to recall his and his companion's conduct among them. He emphasizes their accountability to the Thessalonians, who have witnessed their actions, and God, who scrutinizes their motives and integrity.

The Apostles and those who served alongside them lived devoutly, demonstrating holiness in their relationship with God, uprightly, acting righteously in their dealings with others, and blamelessly, maintaining a commendable reputation. A high standard for integrity and righteousness has been set in serving God and the church.

As a Teacher

As you know, like a father with his own children, we encouraged, comforted, and implored each one of you to walk worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory (2:11-12).

Like a father, Paul's guidance to the Thessalonians involved three key actions: exhorting, encouraging, and imploring. *Exhorting* involves coming alongside someone to aid, direct, and wisely instruct, enhancing their character and conduct—like how the Holy Spirit operates, providing support and guidance.

Encouraging is about offering comfort and consolation, which is crucial for overcoming obstacles and failures. This is meant to uplift those struggling, reflecting the tender care a father provides to his children in their times of need.

Imploring is the practice of personally addressing a person and emphasizing the serious consequences of deviating from God's path. It is a form of spiritual discipline, similar to the corrective measures a father might take to ensure his children adhere to the right course of action.

2:13-16: Contrast Between the Thessalonians and the Jews

2:14-16 - How the Thessalonians Received the Gospel

For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, since you have also suffered the same things from people of your own country, just as they did from the Jews (2:13-14).

They Embraced the Gospel

This is why we constantly thank God, because when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the word of God, which also works effectively in you who believe (2:13).

Paul expressed gratitude for the Thessalonians' openness and receptiveness to the Word of God, highlighting their willingness to listen and embrace the gospel. Unlike the myriad of human opinions and philosophies prevalent in Thessalonica—a hub for diverse teachings due to its strategic location—the message they delivered was recognized and accepted by the Thessalonians as the true word from God, distinct from any other teachings they had encountered.

This deeply and personally impacted them, indicating their heartfelt belief. For them, the gospel was not just any message but the divine truth leading to salvation. One must not only receive the gospel but also accept it, putting its precepts and principles into action in daily life.

The Word of God starkly contrasts human words; it is neither empty nor powerless¹¹. It operates effectively and efficiently, accomplishing divine purposes in the lives of believers. Unlike human wisdom, which fails to produce lasting spiritual effects, God's Word has a dynamic and transformative impact. It brings salvation, sanctification, maturity, freedom, guidance, growth, success, and hope to those who embrace it. This powerful influence of Scripture is due to its divine origin. It fulfills God's intentions in many ways, from saving souls to guiding believers toward spiritual maturity and success. While human

wisdom falls short, the Word of God actively works in believers' lives, achieving outcomes beyond human capability.

The Thessalonians Honored Others

For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Christ Jesus that are in Judea (2:14a).

The Thessalonian church's genuine embrace of the gospel is evidenced by their emulation of Paul, Silas, and Timothy and the believers in Judea, further propelling Paul's gratitude for God's saving work in them. Despite likely having no direct contact with the Judean churches, the Thessalonians mirrored them, notably in experiencing persecution. The shared experiences among the early Christians, united by faith, persecution, and the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work, came about despite being separated across thousands of miles.

Great Perseverance

you have also suffered the same things from people of your own country, just as they did from the Jews (2:14b).

Just as the believers in Judea faced persecution from their fellow Jews, the Thessalonians also experienced persecution from the Gentile community soon after embracing the gospel, as detailed in Acts 17:1-4. This persecution involved not only non-believing Jews but also their Gentile allies, as described in Acts 17:5-8.

2:15-16: The Jews Were Not to be Commended

A sudden and intense transition marks verses 15-16. The tension here, from their long-standing opposition to Paul since his conversion, is well-documented in the Acts. Jewish hostility began as Paul started preaching Jesus as the Son of God in Damascus, leading to numerous confrontations. Their resentment intensified when Paul and his companions began successfully spreading the gospel among Gentiles, triggering jealousy and anger among the Jews. This demonstrates a significant contrast between the embracing faith of the Thessalonian believers and the rejecting stance of the unbelieving Jews. Here, we see some of the challenges Paul faced in his ministry.

The Jews:

- 2:15a: Rejected God's Word
- 2:15b-16a: Hindered Christians
- 2:16b: Would be punished.

2:17-20: Paul's Love for the Thessalonians

Paul's affection for the Thessalonians starkly contrasts with the hostility from the Jews who opposed their mission. Unlike the Jews, who were indifferent to the Thessalonians' spiritual well-being, Paul and his companions deeply cared about them, evidenced by Paul's use of "brethren" to express his genuine affection. No one could ever claim that Paul and his companions were indifferent to them. Paul's attachment to the church remained strong despite being forced to leave Thessalonica prematurely, like a parent separated from a child. His extended stays in other cities like Ephesus and Corinth highlight that,

under different circumstances, he would have preferred a more extended ministry in Thessalonica. Being unwillingly separated yet remaining connected in spirit is further emphasized by Paul's reaction to Timothy's positive report about the Thessalonians' faith and love, offering him comfort despite his distress and longing to reunite with them.

2:18: Opposition from Satan

Satan is always determined to halt the progress of Christ. The term Paul uses here, "hindered," originally referred to military tactics such as digging a trench or destroying a road to block an adversary's advance. Satan prevented Paul from returning to Thessalonica, effectively acting as a barrier to the gospel's spread. Although Paul doesn't detail the specific means of this hindrance, it's implied that the opposition could have stemmed from incidents like the turmoil at Jason's house, which led to a legally binding pledge (referenced in Acts 17:9), bringing to light the natural obstacles he faced in sharing the gospel.

2:19-20: Looking for Christ's Return

Paul consistently emphasized living in anticipation of Christ's return. He taught the Thessalonians that the glorious future awaiting believers at Christ's return strongly incentivizes spiritual service. He spoke about the source of his hope, joy, and what he referred to as his "crown of exultation," which pointed to the ultimate victory and reward for faithfulness. One day, he would triumph over sin, suffering, death, and judgment. He would experience victory, joy, and righteousness from a life lived in faithful anticipation of Christ's return. This anticipation of eternal rewards and the transformation of Christians into their perfected state is fundamental to Paul's relationship with the Thessalonians and his broader Biblical teaching.

Conclusion

In 1 Thessalonians 2, we are reminded of Paul's example of leadership and faithfulness while dealing with adversity. His defense of his ministry brought out fundamental principles of Christian leadership: integrity, mission, and doctrine. Paul stood firm in the clarity and purity of the gospel he was entrusted with. His *tenacity* under persecution, unwavering integrity in the face of deception, God-given authority, accountability to divine scrutiny, and *humility* in service serve as his credentials. They are the blueprint for spiritual leadership that is as relevant today as it was in the first century.

In action, Paul's leadership mimicked a mother's tender care and a father's guiding strength. He and those with him shared their lives, moved with sacrificial love, and were examples of life above reproach.

We also examined the sharp contrast between the Thessalonian believers, who embraced the Word of God as the valid message of salvation, and the Jews, who rejected and obstructed the gospel. Paul called for perseverance in persecution and pursuing a life that honors God despite opposition.

Finally, his message culminated in his deep love for the Thessalonians—a love that mirrored God's love for His people. It transcended distance, withstood spiritual warfare, and looked forward to the blessed hope of Christ's return. He encouraged them to stand firm until the end.

Like the first century, our time is filled with skepticism and opposition. The call to Christian leadership remains—to serve with courage, lead with integrity, teach with responsibility, live with humility, and love deeply with the sacrificial love of Christ. Let us receive, accept, and apply the gospel in our lives as we anticipate the triumphant return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For Thought and Reflection

1. How does Paul's approach to facing opposition and criticism in 1 Thessalonians 2 serve as an example for Christians today in dealing with criticism of their faith or moral stances?
2. In what ways do the five essential qualities of spiritual leadership (tenacity, integrity, authority, accountability, and humility) discussed by Paul relate to the leadership roles in your own life, whether in church, work, or family?
3. Discuss the relevance of Paul's use of parental imagery (mother and father) in describing his relationship with the Thessalonians. How does this shape our understanding of the way spiritual leaders are to care?
4. How can Paul's model of sacrificial love and shared life in the gospel challenge and inspire modern Christians in their mission and ministry practices?
5. Reflect on the contrast between the Thessalonians' reception of the gospel and its rejection by the Jewish opponents. What does this tell us about the varying responses to the gospel throughout history and today?
6. Paul emphasizes the power of God's Word as opposed to human wisdom. How have you experienced the power of the Word in your own life, and how does it differ from other philosophies or teachings you have encountered?
7. Considering the various forms of persecution faced by early Christians, discuss the concept of perseverance in faith. How do we see this principle being necessary in the current context of the church?
8. How does Paul's sense of accountability before God impact how he conducts his ministry, and what lessons can we draw from this for personal spiritual accountability?

9. Analyze the significance of Paul's thwarted attempts to visit the Thessalonians due to Satanic hindrance. How do we understand and respond to spiritual warfare in our spiritual pursuits?

10. Paul's anticipation of Christ's return greatly influenced his ministry and encouragement to the Thessalonians. How should the hope of Christ's return influence the life and service of Christians today?

⁷ Morris, Leon. "The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians." *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989, p. 68.

⁸ See Galatians 1:10.

⁹ These qualities are identified by John MacArthur in his commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians. I liked them so much, that I decided to use them as headings for each verse. See MacArthur, John F., Jr. *1 & 2 Thessalonians*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Press, 2002, p. 42.

¹⁰ See Romans 5:5.

¹¹ See Hebrews 4:12-13.