10/04/26 A Model of Effective Discipleship
1 Thessalonians 2:1–8

Welcome…

We are studying the book of 1 Thessalonians and our text today may be one of the best examples of discipleship anywhere in the New Testament.

Paul did not just impart the gospel to the Thessalonians, he shared his life. There was truth and relationship. Doctrine and example. Instruction and affection.

Let's read about it now in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8…

One of the most important questions we can ask as Christians is this: How does God use us to help other people grow spiritually?

Jesus commanded His followers in Matthew 28:19, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations."

A disciple is a follower of Jesus Christ. And discipleship is intentionally helping another person become a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

That means discipleship is not just a church program. It is not merely a class. It is not something reserved for pastors, elders, missionaries, or unusually mature Christians. Discipleship is part of the normal Christian life.

Older believers disciple younger believers. Community Group leaders disciple the people in their groups. Student ministry leaders disciple students. Women disciple other women. Men disciple other men. Parents disciple their children.

Our text today may be one of the best examples of discipleship anywhere in the New Testament. 1 Thessalonians 2 gives a model of effective discipleship that involves more than the content we teach.

Main Point: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 describes three key components of effective discipleship so that we can know that God is magnified and our labor is not in vain.

Effective Discipleship is Built on a Godly Message- verses 1-2
Effective Discipleship is Built on a Godly Motive – verse 3-6
Effective Discipleship is Built on a Godly Manner – verses 7-8

Paul did not simply give the Thessalonians information. He gave them himself.

My prayer is that God will show each of us how we can be used for His glory in helping others to follow Christ, That the Lord will show each of you someone you can encourage, teach, pray for, and help grow toward maturity in Christ. And above all, I pray that all of our lives point people not to ourselves, but to Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us.

In this model of effective discipleship, we see the first element:

I. Effective Discipleship is built on a godly message: the gospel of God

Look at verses 1-2…

The word translated “vain” carries the idea of being empty, fruitless, or without result. Paul says, “Our ministry among you was not empty.”

How did he know? Because as we saw last week in chapter 1, their lives had been changed. Back in chapter 1, verse 9, Paul says that they had “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.” The gospel had transformed them.

But that fruit did not come under easy circumstances. In verse 2 Paul says, “But after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition.”

In Acts 16, Paul had cast a demon out of a slave girl in Philippi who had been making her masters a great deal of money through fortune-telling. When her masters realized that their hope of profit was gone, they were furious. They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them before the magistrates. The crowd joined in the attack. Their clothes were torn off, they were beaten repeatedly with rods, thrown into the inner prison, and their feet were fastened in stocks.

Paul uses two words to describe what happened in 1 Thessalonians 2:2. The word “suffered” points to the physical pain—the rods, the wounds, the stocks. The word “mistreated” comes from a Greek word that describes shameful, insulting, outrageous treatment intended to humiliate someone publicly.

Paul and Silas had been beaten without a trial and publicly disgraced without committing a crime.

And how did they respond? What were Paul and Silas doing that night in prison? Acts 16:25 tells us, “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God.” Think about that. Backs bleeding. Feet locked in stocks. Voices raised in praise to God. That is remarkable!

If you had just been publicly humiliated, beaten with rods, and thrown into prison for preaching the gospel, what would you be tempted to do?

Take a three-month sabbatical? File a complaint? Maybe keep a low profile for a while?

You might at least be tempted to say, “Perhaps we should be a little less outspoken in the next city.”

But Paul did exactly the opposite. He and his coworkers traveled about a hundred miles down the road to Thessalonica—and preached the same gospel again.

That is why Paul says in verse 2, “We had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition.”

Notice where Paul's courage came from. He doesn't say, “We were naturally courageous men.” He says, “We had the boldness in our God.”

Their courage came from God because their confidence was not in themselves. And they were convinced that the gospel they proclaimed possessed the power of God to save.

That is why Paul could later write in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

Paul knew that he did not need to make the gospel more acceptable. He did not need to soften it, improve it, or make it more appealing. He simply needed to faithfully proclaim it. And so do we.

Look at verse 3…

Paul's ministry did not involve deceit. The word carries the idea of trickery or bait. Paul did not manipulate people.

His message was true. His motives were pure. His methods were honest.

The word "exhortation" in verse 3 means an urgent appeal, a call that demands a response. And Paul says that appeal did not spring from falsehood. He did not invent his gospel. He received it from God (Gal. 1:11–12). Three times in this chapter he calls it "the gospel of God" (verses 2, 8, 9). God designed it. God revealed it. God owns it.

The gospel is good news for sinners because it promises freely to forgive all the sins of those who believe. As Paul states in Romans 4:5, "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness."

Jesus illustrated the same truth in His parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). The proud Pharisee thought that he was right with God through his religious practices, whereas the tax collector could only cry out in Luke 18:13, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" Jesus said that the tax collector went to his house justified, whereas the Pharisee did not. The best news in the world is that if you come to Jesus with all of your sin and cry out to Him for mercy through Jesus' shed blood, He freely forgives your sin and gives you mercy and grace!

So why do people oppose the gospel? Why would anyone have a problem with such good news? People are opposed to the gospel because it takes away all grounds for boasting in our good deeds.

Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."

The gospel is a humbling message. It requires us to acknowledge that we are sinners with no claim on heaven and no ability to save ourselves. It tells us that our problem is not merely what we have done, but who we are apart from Christ. Our hearts are sinful, and we desperately need a Savior. That is why proud people often resist the gospel—it confronts our self-righteousness and leaves us completely dependent upon the grace of God.

Two weeks ago, I attended my 40th college reunion at the Naval Academy in Maryland. One of my classmates, Jim Young, whom I had not seen in 40 years, came up to me and said, "John Marc, over 40 years ago, when we were both midshipmen, you came into my room and explained the gospel of Jesus Christ to me using a Bible and drawing the Bridge Illustration. You told me that I was a sinner who needed a Savior. I wasn't receptive to that message. In fact, I was offended. But I never forgot what you told me. I knew I was separated from God because of my sin."

Then Jim said, "I want you to know that I am now a believer—and so is my wife. I want to thank you for faithfully sharing the truth of the gospel with me and planting a seed that eventually bore fruit. We now attend a church in Virginia where the Word is faithfully preached, and we are both actively serving there."
And then Jim and I gave each other a big hug.

Think about that. For more than 40 years, I had no idea what God had done with that conversation. At the time, Jim wasn't receptive—he was offended! From my perspective, it might have appeared that sharing the gospel

with him had accomplished nothing. But God's Word had been planted in his heart, and God eventually caused that seed to bear fruit.

That is why effective discipleship must always be built on a godly message. We cannot change or compromise the gospel in order to make it more acceptable to people. Our responsibility is not to make the message comfortable; our responsibility is to faithfully communicate the truth God has entrusted to us and leave the results to Him.

Paul had been mistreated in Philippi for preaching the gospel, but when he arrived in Thessalonica, he didn't soften the message. He didn't change the message. He didn't become silent. Verse 2 says, "We had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition." And if you read Acts 17 you find out that when Paul preached the gospel in Thessalonica the Jews because jealous and formed a mob and stirred up the city authorities and Paul and Silas had to leave the city at night.

But Paul faithfully trusted the gospel message and he faithfully delivered it because he trusted the God who gave it. And so must we.

But effective discipleship is not only about what we say; it is also about why we say it. God is concerned not only with the truth of our message, but with the motives of our hearts. We can say the right things for the wrong reasons. So, Paul moves from the message he proclaimed in verses 1–3 to the motives that drove his ministry in verses 4–6.

II. Effective Discipleship is Built on a Godly Motive: pleasing God from the heart.

Verse 4…

God had entrusted Paul with something incredibly precious—the gospel message. Paul understood himself as a steward.

In Genesis 39, Joseph was a steward in the household of Potiphar. He owned nothing, but he managed everything. Genesis 39:6 says Potiphar "left everything he owned in Joseph's charge." And when temptation came from Potiphar's wife, Joseph refused, because he knew that everything in his hands belonged to his master, and ultimately to God.

That is what a steward is. He owns nothing, but he handles everything that belongs to his master, for his master's benefit, and one day he will give an account. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4:2, "It is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy."

And Paul continues in verse 4, "so we speak not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts."

This so important for us to hear, for as long as we are trying to please people, we will be frustrated. The requirements keep changing. The friend who cheered for you yesterday turns against you today. The crowd that shouted "Hosanna" on Sunday shouted "Crucify" on Friday. Peace will always be out of reach for the person who lives for applause.

Paul had learned this lesson. He wrote in Galatians 1:10, "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ." That does not mean Paul was careless or harsh with people. But beneath every interaction was a single question: Does this please God?

Why did Paul live that way? Because he knew that God "examines our hearts." The heart is the real you: your thoughts, desires, will, and motives. People see the outward performance; God sees your heart.

Years ago, an agnostic man was contemplating suicide. He decided that if he could find one minister who truly lived what he preached, he would listen to him. So he hired a private investigator to follow Will Houghton, a pastor who became president of Moody Bible Institute. The investigator watched Houghton's habits, his dealings, his private life. The report came back: Houghton's life was above reproach. He was the real thing. The agnostic went to hear him preach, trusted Christ, and later sent his daughter to Moody.

Here's the question: What would a private investigator discover about you? What would he find in your calendar, your checkbook, your web browser history, your text messages, your tone of voice at home? Here is the sobering truth: God is the ultimate investigator. He does not need to hire anyone. He sees it all.

But here is the freeing truth: if you live for an audience of One, you are liberated from the tyranny of the crowd.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:3-4, "To me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you... the one who examines me is the Lord." 2 Corinthians 5:9 says, "We make it our ambition... to be pleasing to God."

Think of how wise people plan for retirement. While they are working, they cannot live only for the moment. They delay gratification today so that they will be ready for tomorrow. That is what a faithful believer does. We live faithfully today in the light of that day when we stand before the Lord. We live for the glory of God.

Notice verses 5-6… "For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness."

Paul mentions several temptations that can corrupt ministry. The first is flattery. Flattery is not the same as encouragement. Encouragement identifies genuine evidence of God's grace in someone. Flattery tells people what they want to hear because we want something from them.

Second, Paul rejected greed. He did not use ministry to enrich himself.

And third, he did not seek recognition. He says in verse 6, "Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others."

Paul wasn't looking for applause. He wasn't asking, "How can these people make much of me?" He was asking, "How can I help these people make much of Christ?"

And that is essential in discipleship, because discipleship can subtly become about us. We like being the person with the answers. We like having people come to us for advice. We like being needed. We like being appreciated. And if we are not careful, we can even begin to measure our success by how dependent people become on us.

But that is the opposite of healthy discipleship.

When John the Baptist's disciples became concerned that people were leaving John and going to Jesus, John responded with these memorable words in John 3:30: "He must increase, but I must decrease."

That is a wonderful motto for every discipler: "Christ must increase. I must decrease."

Think about a road sign. Suppose you are driving to Yosemite and you see a sign that says, "Yosemite — 40 miles." You don't stop the car, get out, take pictures of the sign, and spend the weekend sitting underneath it!

The sign has fulfilled its purpose when it points you beyond itself to the destination. That is what a faithful discipler does. We are signposts. Christ is the destination. Our purpose is to point people beyond ourselves to Him.

Sometimes the person you disciple may eventually know more than you do. Praise God!
They may become a better teacher than you. Praise God!
They may develop gifts you don't have. Praise God!
They may eventually disciple others more effectively than you ever could. Praise God!

Because the goal of discipleship was never to build our kingdom. It is to build God's kingdom.

The godly motive of a faithful discipler is not, "How can I get people to think more highly of me?" but, "How can I help people think more highly of Christ?"

At Cornerstone, this should characterize every ministry. When we serve in children's ministry, we aren't trying to make children impressed with us. We want them to know Christ. When we work with students, we want them to follow Christ long after they graduate from our student ministry.

When we lead Community Groups, we want people to become mature believers who can eventually help others. When elders, deacons, counselors, ministry leaders, and mature believers invest in people, the goal is not dependence upon us. The goal is maturity in Christ.

Ephesians 4:13 describes the goal as attaining "to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." That is effective discipleship.

Effective discipleship is built on a godly message - the gospel of God. Effective discipleship is built on a godly motive - pleasing God from the heart.

But Paul has saved perhaps the most beautiful key component for last. Certainly, effective discipleship requires courage. It requires integrity. It requires humility. But if those qualities are separated from genuine affection, discipleship can become cold and mechanical.

So, Paul shows us that effective disciplers do not merely teach people. They genuinely love people. That brings us to point 3:

III. Effective Discipleship is Built on a Godly Manner: genuine love for people.

Verse 7…

He says in verse 7, "We proved to be gentle among you." Gentleness is kindness in action: patience, compassion, tenderness, tolerance of immaturity. The world tends to see gentleness as weakness. But in the kingdom of God, gentleness is strength under control.

Paul could have used any number of pictures for ministry: a steward, a soldier, a farmer, a herald, a shepherd. But here he chose the most intimate image of all: a mother nursing her child.

Paul says he was gentle "as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children." The phrase "tenderly cares" literally means to warm with body heat. It is the picture of a mother holding her newborn close against her chest

to keep the little one warm. Paul was not a hired caretaker punching a clock. The Thessalonians were like his "own children" and he held them close.

He says in verse 8, "Having so fond an affection for you." The word Paul uses here means a deep, earnest longing for someone. That is how deeply Paul loved these believers.

And notice how emotional this language is. Paul was not afraid to let people know he loved them. He told them. He showed them. They felt it when he was with them. Some of us think discipleship is only about transferring information. But Paul says it is also about expressing affection.

Something I was told when I started ministry that I often repeat to those I disciple in ministry, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

People need to feel the love of Christ through us as they receive the Word of Christ from us.

Verse 8 continues "We were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives." The word impart means to share something while still keeping it. That is what happens with the gospel: you give it away, and you still have it. In fact, you have it more.

But Paul did not stop with the gospel. He gave "our own lives," literally, "our own souls." He gave them his time, his energy, his presence, his heart. He did not hand them a book and leave town. He moved into their lives and cared for them "as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children."

Any mother in this room knows that babies are not convenient. They cry when they are hungry. They wake you up in the middle of the night. They spit up on your clean shirt. They require constant attention. And so do new believers! Discipleship is messy. It will interrupt your schedule. It will test your patience. It will cost you sleep and comfort and control.

But a mother gives it gladly. Remember the story in 1 Kings 3? Two women came before King Solomon, both claiming the same baby. Solomon ordered the child cut in two. One woman said, "Fine, divide him." The other cried out, "Give her the child; don't kill him!" And Solomon knew immediately who the real mother was, because the real mother would rather lose her own claim than see her child harmed. That is sacrificial love. It gives itself away for the good of the child.

And why did Paul love like that? Notice how verse 8 ends, "Because you had become very dear to us." They were not projects; they were people. They were not numbers; they were children. They were not a ministry assignment; they were family.

This is what the Lord wants in our homes, in our Community Groups, in our friendships, and across this congregation. Not a discipleship program that a few people sign up for, but a discipleship culture where every one of us is deliberately doing spiritual good to someone else, sharing both the gospel and our lives in love.

The reason we can disciple this way is because this is exactly how Christ has discipled us.

Jesus came with a godly message: the very words of the Father. Jesus came with a godly motive: seeking not His own glory, but the glory of the One who sent Him. And He came with a godly manner: gentle and lowly in heart, not only sharing truth with us but giving His very self. He laid down His life on the cross and rose again, out of love for His Father and love for those the Father had given Hm.

Paul prayed in Ephesians 3:18, "I pray that you grasp how long and wide and high and deep is the love of Christ."

If you are here this morning and you have never trusted Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, that is where discipleship begins. Not with your effort, but with His grace. Turn from your sin, trust in Jesus, and follow Him.

And if you are a believer, ask yourself, "Who can I help follow Jesus? And how can I help them follow the Lord?"

You will see at the bottom of your sermon outline a note about Discipleship Resources that our listed on our church website to help you as your help others.

You don't need to be famous to help another person follow Christ. You don't need a platform. You don't need a seminary degree. You don't need to have every answer.

But discipling simply requires that you know Christ, that you are growing in Christ, you are in God's Word, you love people, and you're willing to share your life with them.

Look to Christ, He did not disciple His followers from a distance. He called them to be with Him. They travelled with Him. They ate with Him. They watched Him pray. Heard Him teach. They saw His compassion. They observed His obedience to the Father. They witnessed Christ's response to opposition.

And ultimately, He did more than share His life with them. He gave His life for them. Jesus said in Mark 10:45, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Because Jesus gave Himself for us, we give ourselves for others. Because Jesus loved us, we love others. Because Jesus patiently taught us, we patiently teach others. Because Jesus has entrusted the gospel to us, we faithfully entrust it to the next generation.

Some of you may be discouraged today. You have been pouring into a child, a friend, a coworker – to help them follow Christ but there does not appear to be any fruit from your labor, and you wonder if any of it matters. Remember what we heard this morning from 1 Thessalonians chapter 2. When the message is godly, when the motive is godly, and when the manner is godly, the labor is not in vain. You may not see the fruit this week. You may not see it this year. It may take 40 years. But God sees, God works, and God will be magnified.

Let's pray…