



### **Genuine and Gentle Witnessing**

*You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.*

*As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.*

*You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. (1 Thessalonians 2:1-10)*

Expectations are a powerful thing. Perhaps an action-packed movie trailer motivated you to step foot in a theater for the first time in years, only to be sorely disappointed by the whole experience. Maybe a product promises to help you shed some extra pounds or stop snoring, only to fall short and end up in the garbage can. Fact is we human beings are very fickle creatures. When our expectations aren't met or we believe someone has been bamboozling us, we can turn on a dime and get instantly disgusted and disheartened and upset.

As we share the good news about Jesus and describe to others what it means to live as a Christian, we ought to beware of creating unreal expectations that could set up an inquiring soul for failure and disappointment. Any of us can fall into the temptation of trying to please people and persuade the ones we love to follow Jesus by giving them the impression that the Christian life is all roses—that all our pains and sorrows and problems disappear, everyone likes us, and life is an unending string of successes. That may grab their attention in the short term, but it will damage or even destroy their faith in the long run when they discover the truth that the Lord disciplines those he loves (Heb. 12:6), that so very few are enthusiastic to hear about God's forgiveness (Luke 21:17), that God often prefers to sustain us in our pain and poverty and weakness rather than take all our troubles away (2 Cor. 12:9-10). If we are not genuine and upfront about these realities then the faith begun in their hearts will likely share the fate of the seed in Jesus' parable that sprang up quickly but later withered beneath the scorching sun of hardship and persecution (Matt. 13:6,21).

As Paul and his missionary team preached Christ in Thessalonica he made sure to consciously manage expectations. He was genuine about the crosses that come with following Jesus, and he told how he had been persecuted at his previous stop in Philippi, but by so doing the apostle proved that he wasn't trying to win them with flattery and false promises, but rather, come what may, to proclaim the powerful Word of God.

But beyond being transparent and receptive and sharing his love and his life with the Thessalonians, Paul was also gentle. He was sensitive to the perceptions and preconceived notions people have that can create unnecessary roadblocks to faith in Jesus. Prominent in Paul's mind was the accusation that he and his friends were in the ministry for the money. Surely we hear that excuse today as well that "churches are all about getting your money". Paul and his companions neutralized that allegation before it ever arose by refusing to accept any financial help from the Thessalonians, even though it was their right. Instead they worked hard with their own hands to provide their needs so they wouldn't be a burden to the believers. Elsewhere Paul tells us that he followed this practice wherever he went so that it was abundantly clear that he was discharging a duty personally entrusted to him by Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 9).

Following Paul's example, we too ought to be gentle while we tell others about Jesus. We dare not give the impression that we're witnessing to them in order to get brownie points with God or a pat on the back if we can convince them to come to worship. In the end sharing the good news of God's love and forgiveness shouldn't be about us at all. Rather it is all about Jesus, who is using us to call them into his kingdom and share in the glory to come.

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, cleanse our hearts with your forgiveness and purify our motives so that we genuinely and gently witness to your saving love. Amen.*