

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: 1Thessalonians 2:1-12

Sermon Title: "Conduct Becoming and Message Received"

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I just finished a John Grisham book about a 24-year-old who works for a small town newspaper, and then ends up owing it.¹ Willie Traynor is his name, and he came from the University of Syracuse and traveled all the way down to Clanton, a fictitious town in Mississippi. Traynor came from Memphis, so he considers himself a southerner, but the people of Clanton have other ideas. To them, Willie came from the North. That makes him an outside. Besides, nobody knows his granddaddy, so that really makes him suspicious. If the good people of Clanton, MS, don't know your grandparents, then they don't know you, and that makes you an outsider. But Willie ran the newspaper, and he tried to show he was a good guy, a trusted man in the community. He got as involved with the community as he could, crossing both sides of the tracks and warming up to all sorts of people. However, for many they still remained suspicious of Willie.

¹ John Grisham's *The Last Juror*.

We read Paul's account to the Thessalonians, and it seems as though the good people of Thessalonica didn't warm up to him quickly. Could they have been as suspicious of Paul as certain Mississippians were of Willie Traynor?

Paul and his companions weren't treated kindly in Philippi. Paul and Silas tried to help a little girl who was demon-possessed. She worked as a slave for her owners, making them rich by telling people's fortunes. Paul and Silas made an end to that, and brought healing to the little girl. But as a result Paul and Silas were beaten to a pulp by the crowds and sent off to jail.² So the visit to Philippi did not go so well.

Paul and his companions had other places to visit, including Thessalonica. Once again they encountered some strong opposition. Instead of Paul and Silas getting beaten up, a believer in Christ called Jason was dragged from his home, along with other believers, and they were thrown in front of the town rulers to be judged and sentenced. They complained that Paul, Silas, and the others were trying to turn the world upside-down, and they were acting against the laws of the Roman government. They complained that Paul and Silas were proclaiming another King, Jesus Christ, when they already had a king in Rome, Caesar.

² Cf. Acts 16:16-24.

If Caesar finds out that there is another king in the region, he could send in his soldiers and overtake the area. Not good. Some of those Thessalonians were not happy with Paul and his companion's presence. They were outsiders bringing in outside ideas to ruin their peaceful, simple lives.

As Paul writes to the Thessalonians, he realizes that there was tension with their arrival. He understands that it doesn't look good to go from one town to another, stirring up trouble. There had to be a stirring up, however; a stirring up of people's hearts. Paul and his companions were carrying a message directly from God. "God is our witness," Paul says, and "we have been approved by God" to share the Gospel, not to please men and women, but to honor God who tests everybody's hearts.³

Trouble only surfaced, because certain people didn't like what they were hearing. God's word smacked them right in the face, and caused them to take an inventory of their lives. We don't like to take an inventory of our lives. We like to think we are okay, everybody else is okay, so the world is okay. Somebody tells us we are doing something wrong, and become upset, because it sounds like they are judging

³ 1 Thessalonians 2:4-5.

us. They sound more superior to us. That might be the case; or maybe God just threw somebody in front of us, because God wants us to take an inventory of our lives. Whether we like to hear what people have to say or not, we should still take a step back. We should still review what somebody told us, and then ask the question, “Did God just tell me something? Is God telling me to change something?”

I was driving to the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary with the Executive Presbytery of my former presbytery. This was several years ago, when I was a pastor in PA. The EP, Tim, and I were going to a conference held at the seminary, and along the way Tim asked me a question about myself. I cannot remember what he asked me, but I knew it was a personal question. I had known Tim for years, so I felt comfortable with bearing my soul.

I sheepishly shared my concern and felt good about getting this burden off my chest; but then Tim did something that shocked me. He laughed. He laughed like I had told a silly joke, as though my heartfelt story was a silly joke. I was offended. I said nothing to him, but I was upset with Tim for the rest of the drive, which took about an hour. I didn't expect Tim to treat me like that.

When I stepped away from the car and dwelled on

my displeasure, I soon realized that God was speaking through Tim. God was laughing through Tim, and I soon realized how silly my situation was. It was not that big of a deal. It could be easily solved; in fact, God had offered me the solutions through Tim's smiles and laughs. When I took the step back and took inventory of the situation, I thanked God for the answers, and I had a deeper appreciation for Tim's unusual pastoral style.

Paul and Silas gave the masters of a young slave girl the chance to step back and take inventory. Paul and Silas gave people in Philippi and Thessalonica the chance to step back and take inventory. God is witness, and God tests the hearts of all, even of those who do not want to hear it from God. The message is not to please us but to stir us up, wake us up, and make the journey back to our Lord.

Paul doesn't mention the results of his ministry to the Thessalonians. Notice that he doesn't outline how successful they were in sharing the word of God in Thessalonica, in Philippi, or anywhere else. What Paul does is focus on the way he and his companions conducted themselves during the visits.⁴ Behavior is key to sharing God's word.

⁴ Michael W. Holmes, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, cf. 61.

“We didn’t make a visit to your town in order to receive honor from everyone,” Paul tells the Thessalonians. We didn’t come, looking to become the next celebrity of the city, the next pop idol for the population. Paul says they could have made demands as apostles, yet he didn’t come in with all sorts of bravado, daring and boldness, claiming to be scholars of a certain philosophy and expecting people to treat them as such. Paul and his companions assumed nothing. “We were gentle,” he says, “just as a nursing mother cares for her children.” We were affectionately longing for you, so that “we may impart to you the gospel of God; and not just that but also our very lives.”⁵ Paul is not coming at the citizens of Thessalonica as a troublemaker. Trouble will come because certain people don’t want to hear God’s word and take inventories of themselves, but Paul and Company do not arrive to stir up trouble itself. Paul and Company arrive to stir up heart for God’s kingdom. They come to stir up understanding for God’s word, and energy for God’s ministry, and excitement for God’s companionship.

Ministry isn’t accomplished by beating people over the head. That stirs up unnecessary and unproductive trouble. Ministry isn’t shared from a

⁵ 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8.

distance, as though we can hand out God's word from the comfort of our air-conditioned homes. Ministry is hands-on. It is personal, it is up-close. This means we have to care for those to whom we minister. We have to have a heart for them, emotions and thoughts for them. We should have sympathy for their concerns, their struggles, their frustrations, their longings.

One of the reasons our Food Pantry on Thursdays works so well is, I believe, the volunteers feel something for the ones we help. The people at the table do more than sit with a client and gather information. They also speak with them. They have small talk. They laugh together. They work together to get the client some needed food. The clients don't just leave the building with a cart of food, but we walk outside with them. We push the cart to their cars and load up their backseats or trunks with food. We continue with the small talk, and cheerfully wish the clients a good day. This is not to say that we the volunteers don't get tired after 30 minutes to an hour. This isn't to say that one or two of our clients can be pains-in-the-neck. This doesn't change our attitude, though. This doesn't keep us from being hands-on, working together to carry out ministry.

When we work with someone to solve a problem,

when we listen to their stories, no matter how odd or interesting they may be, when we allow them to know that somebody cares, good things happen. We grab their attention. They feel comfortable with us. They are more receptive to hear God's good word, and consider how God is influencing their lives.

“You are witnesses along with God,” Paul tells the Thessalonians, “to how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you...”⁶ Witnesses. Leonard Sweet is a well-known Christian author who once talked about the word *witness*. He doesn't like the word so much. If you know anything about Leonard Sweet, you know that he likes to replace words and even change them around. So instead of word *witness*, he likes the word *withness*. Withness is Sweet's shorthand for “indispensable relationships.”⁷ A witness may see something from a distance, but a withness sees all things right next to the other person. A Withness stays with the other person in proximity, in emotions, in thought.

So Paul and his companions were withnesses to all the people they visited. They longed to be with each one of those people. They hoped for the message of Jesus Christ to strike a chord within each citizen of

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 2:10.

⁷ Leonard Sweet, *11 Indispensable Relationships You Can't Be Without*, 20.

each town as it did within them. They wished for more people to become witnesses to others, so that indispensable relationships would grow between people and God.

When we are with another person, he or she is more willing to listen to us. Something stirs within them, and they like to hear more. We may even be more honest with the person, especially if they are missing something they shouldn't miss. This only comes from being with the other person through the joys and struggles.

Notice in verses 11-12 how Paul talks about urging and encouraging the Thessalonians as a father would a child. Before, in verse 7, Paul said that he and his companions cherished the Thessalonians like nursing mothers. That's when they first met each other and got to know each other. Now that that is done – everybody is familiar with each other – Paul and his companions could now urge and encourage, admonish and direct the Thessalonians like fathers. Fathers tend to be the heavier hand but for a reason. Like I say to my son when he is driving, “When we are in the car I am the no-nonsense teacher,” and that is because I want him to drive a car the best he can. And I know he can.

Once we feel comfortable with each other,

sometimes something needs to be said in order to face the sin in a person's life. He or she takes an inventory of himself or herself. But the person can do so, because we are not going to walk away. We are witnesses to them. It is good to know that when we wrestle with sin, we have somebody helping us along the way. We may do the same for another. We not only help them hear God's word but also deal with it, live with it, and make it a part of their being.

Indispensable relationships. Witness. In it together. That's what we want. Relationships that make a difference with others and with God. Working together to promote the good news of Jesus Christ, modeling lives that are full of love and commitment. It all makes the lessons of God go down smoother. It all makes living life more enjoyable.