

Motivations

David Flatt

Some passages of Scripture mean more to some than others. This is not to say some Scriptures are more important than others. It just means, passages resonate differently to different people.

1 Thessalonians chapter two often resonates with Gospel preachers. Paul expresses his motivations for preaching the Gospel as sincerely as he can. However, Paul's expressions were more than just words. The words Paul writes calls to memory his conduct while in Thessalonica. Conduct reveals the heart.

Paul would sometimes describe the character of his preaching. In this text, he says he did not use flattery or deception in his preaching (1 Thess. 2:3). In his letter to the Corinthians, he writes that he did not use eloquent words of wisdom (1 Cor. 1:17). Due to how Paul sometimes characterizes his preaching, some have concluded that he was not a dynamic public speaker. Now, Paul may or may not have been a dynamic public speaker: who is to say? If I know anything, I know that everyone has an opinion regarding a preacher's public speaking abilities! This is not his point. The point Paul makes in characterizing his preaching regards the content of his message.

Paul's message did not reflect conventional wisdom. Paul's message did not reflect conventional rhetorical styles. In the days of the ancient Greeks, the art of rhetoric was used as both a tool and entertainment.

Sophists, as they were known, were similar to modern-day lawyers or politicians. They could persuade a group of nearly anything regardless their personal beliefs (sophist comes from the Greek word "sophia" meaning "wisdom"). Someone might hire them to make their case. For example, the Jews hired Tertullus to make a persuasive case against Paul (Acts 24:1). Tertullus is described as an "orator."

Paul did not want to do anything to distort, hinder, or diminish the message he taught. Paul did not want people to be influenced by his personality. The cult of personality was alive and well in Paul's day as it is in ours. He states he did not want the fact that he was an apostle to influence how people perceived him and his message. The Gospel was influential enough to persuade people to believe.

Rather than use flattery, deception, or authority, Paul used love in his teaching. Paul always appealed to love when trying to persuade people. The love of God proven through Jesus is what compelled the Thessalonians to turn from idols to serve the true and living God (1 Thess. 1:9-10). There is nothing more persuasive than the love of God. Therefore, Paul always appealed by love in his teaching.

For example, in his letter to Philemon, Paul wrote, "...*though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you*" (Phm. 1:8-9). Paul did not brow-beat people. Instead, he used a better way (1 Cor. 12:31). We could learn a great deal from Paul's effective use of love in our efforts to persuade.

Now, we can begin to get a sense of what it would have been like to have had a seat at the synagogue for those three weeks Paul taught in Thessalonica. Paul describes his gentleness like a mother nursing her children (1 Thess. 2:7). By love and gentleness, Paul was hoping to persuade them. He was willing to do whatever he needed in order to save them.

Paul was not trying to get something from the Thessalonians. Nor was he looking to advance his reputation: he did not seek glory. As a matter of fact, Paul characterized such pursuits as “vain-glory” or “selfish ambition” (Phil. 2:3). Many religious leaders seek followers for what they can get from them. This was true then as it is now.

Instead of taking anything from the Thessalonians, Paul worked to provide for his own needs. He did this as a way to prove his authenticity to the people he taught. Paul describes the intension behind this practice in his second letter to the saints at Corinth:

Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? (2 Cor. 12:14-15).

To further evidence their motivations in their work, Paul calls the Thessalonians as character witnesses to their conduct. They witnessed holiness, righteousness, and blamelessness in the lives of Paul, Silas, and Timothy. No one could dispute this. Therefore, if they encountered anyone attempting to discredit Paul, they simply needed to remember what they witnessed of these honorable men.

Sometimes we will hear accusations, suspicion, gossip, and slander regarding Christians that we have known in the past. They may have been upstanding brethren in the time we knew them; yet, we can be easily persuaded by someone trying to undermine their credibility. Perhaps we need to give reputable brethren the benefit of the doubt when accusations are made.

Lastly, Paul compares his efforts among the Thessalonians to a father (1 Thess. 2:11-12). Like a father, Paul exhorted, encouraged, and charged the Thessalonians. He was forthright in explaining the truth.

Earlier, he compared his efforts to a mother. Bringing to mind the image of a mother and father, Paul gives us a sense of balanced teaching. Mothers and fathers are different in their roles and approaches to child-rearing; yet, both are needed to train children. Likewise, gentleness and sternness are equally needed in the work of preaching.

Like a father, Paul sternly and clearly taught the Thessalonians how to live worthy of the Creator. Much of what Paul will write in the balance of this letter concerns godly living. Living in the Creator’s kingdom demands moral and ethical conduct which is different from those who lived in Caesar’s kingdom.

Conclusion

Without question, Paul loved the saints at Thessalonica. He wrote, “*Being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us*” (1 Thess. 2:8).

The Greek term translated “*being affectionately desirous of you*” is only used in this New Testament passage. Paul is expressing his love for them. Paul was willing to die for these saints. No doubt, Paul felt regret for having to leave them as persecution was becoming fierce. However, they knew Paul was better alive to them than dead.

Love is the underlining theme of Paul’s work as an apostle and his relationship with the Thessalonians. Love is the underlining theme of the Gospel. Are we being guided by love in our teaching? Are we being guided by love as a church? Do we affectionately desire each other to be faithful to God? What are we doing to nurture such love in our lives? **DF**