AS A NURSING MOTHER

1 Thessalonians 2:1–16

Key Verses: 2:7,8

“Instead, we were like young children among you. As a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.”

Everybody wants something. In our world we are constantly being bombarded with marketing, whether it is on the internet or on TV or even in person. So there’s a saying, “What are you trying to sell me?” It can be exhausting. Young people have become very cynical about it. But in today’s passage we see a very different kind of person. The Apostle Paul is defending the apostles’ ministry to the Thessalonians, and shares that they lived in a way quite different to those trying to get something. Instead, they came to give, and to give purely. No other motives. Their example shows us how we can live in a manner worthy of God and in a way that truly advances the gospel. What is it? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

In Paul’s day there were a group of people known as traveling philosophers. They would go from city to city and speak in public areas, and then leave. They became the brunt of jokes, because although they spoke well and seemed to impress people initially, what they did had very little lasting impact of helping anyone. In fact, they tried to take money from people and gain their own fame and glory. They were manipulative of the crowds they spoke to. They used deceptive speech, flattery and were trying to get people to give money to them.

As we have seen, Paul’s experience in Thessalonica was brief. He was there for perhaps only three weeks. He had to leave in a hurry and didn’t go back in person. His enemies were evidently spreading rumors that Paul was just like one of those traveling philosophers. So in this part of his letter he reminds the Thessalonians of their first-hand experience with him. He repeatedly says “you know” or “remember.” A key element in growing in the Christian faith is to have a personal experience of the gospel; it cannot be based on what other people are telling us. And this personal experience, in light of this letter, often comes through a personal experience with genuine servants of Christ.

Look at verse 1. The “results” Paul mentions here are similar to what he had said in 1:5a: “…because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.” This is what happened in the people who heard the apostles’ teaching—in a word, they were changed. This is perhaps the first test of whether anyone is really serving Christ—are there such results, are people changed through their ministry?

Read verse 2. The Thessalonians knew how the apostles had been treated outrageously in nearby Philippi. Paul and Silas had been stripped, beaten with rods, and then, severely flogged and put in jail, all for doing nothing wrong. When they arrived in Thessalonica, surely they were still recovering from all the wounds on their bodies, and the believers there could actually see how beaten up they had been. Then they experienced strong opposition in Thessalonica as well, when some jealous Jews started a riot and almost killed the apostles. Paul writes, “…but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel…” Only God could help them in such a situation. They boldly kept talking about Jesus because his death and resurrection are the gospel of God. The apostles’ courage and persistence were further proof that they were real servants of Christ.

Then Paul goes on to describe their motives. Read verses 3–6. Some people try to teach others when they themselves are “in error.” Some have impure motives. What are impure motives? It’s when we want to use people for our own gain or gratification; we’re not really interested in helping or building them up. A pure motive means, above all else, just trying to please God. Paul said elsewhere that whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached, and because of that, he rejoiced (Php1:18). But in these verses we learn how important it is to have pure motives in ministering to others. People may not be able to see our motives, but God can. God is our witness. God is watching us. God tests our hearts. God wants us to share the gospel of Jesus simply in order to please him, and simply because we love people. If we have other personal motives, we can’t really endure, and, God is not pleased.

Paul also mentions in these verses how some people are good at hiding their real motives. They “put on a mask,” meaning they act like they care when they don’t. They speak flattering words. But what they want are people’s praise or their financial support. We are all sinners who, given the opportunity, would be the same way. We need God’s help to be genuine and have pure motives. In verse 4 Paul says “we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.” That’s an amazing statement! Who can say that? But it’s not self-promotion; it’s a sobering truth. God approves of certain people and entrusts them with his gospel. Having God’s approval and God’s trust is the best there is.

In the last part of verse 6 Paul writes “even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority.” Those who are chosen by God to be Christ’s apostles have Christ’s authority. But they don’t use their authority to dominate others, as sinful human beings usually do. Our Lord Jesus told his disciples, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all (Mk10:42–44). Paul and the other apostles followed these words of our Lord Jesus practically in their dealings with people.

Read verses 7,8. When Paul says “we were like young children among you,” he meant not only that they didn’t exercise authority, but also that they were humble, honest and simple, and vulnerable and transparent, not manipulative. Usually it takes just a few minutes to tell how a person is. The Thessalonians didn’t have much time with the apostles, but they could immediately tell how simple and authentic they were. The same is true today. In ministry we don’t have to put on an act; we just have to be ourselves, and be authentic.

Then Paul goes on. He says that the apostles lived like a nursing mother caring for her children. What is that like? I don’t really know. But a nursing mother has to be always available for her children, whenever they are hungry. She’s not thinking of herself; she’s thinking of them. She’s basically very unselfish. Many women in history didn’t want to be bothered with nursing their little babies, so they would hire a wet nurse to do it for them. But in Greek Paul emphasizes here that this nursing mother cares for her “own” children. She’s not getting paid to do it. Then why be so unselfish? Paul writes, “Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.” A nursing mother loves her own children, so she’s ready to wake up in the middle of the night or stop whatever else she’s doing to tend to them. She’s not thinking about how much money she might get or how they will someday repay her; she’s doing it purely out of genuine love.

Many people are willing to preach or teach, but not many are willing to live like nursing mothers for infants. Some may even ask why this is necessary. But new believers are in many ways like newborns. They are weak and vulnerable and in need of nurture and protection. No one would just spend an hour a week with a newborn and expect it to survive well the rest of the week on its own. In the same way, if we’re going to be a real help to those who are young and new in faith, it requires much self-sacrifice, spending quality time together. The only way to do that genuinely is when God fills us with his love. The expression “share…our lives” in Greek is literally “share our souls.” It means to share our very selves. Paul and the apostles not only lived with the new believers; they shared their heart and soul with them. In this way the new believers could be built up enough to stand on their own. No traveling philosopher would ever do that.

So how can we live like the apostles? In our sinful nature we’re too selfish. We need the help of the Holy Spirit. God pours out his great love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Ro5:5). Through the Holy Spirit we are united with Christ and receive encouragement, comfort, tenderness and compassion (Php2:1ff.). Through the Holy Spirit’s work in us God transforms us into humble, self-sacrificing, nurturing and mindful servants who genuinely care about others’ spiritual growth. Through the Holy Spirit even strong men can become like nursing mothers for their little children.

Read verse 9. Here Paul also mentions their self-supporting ministry. While living among these new believers the apostles never asked for financial support; instead, they worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone. They spent quality time ministering to the new believers, but in every spare moment they also worked to earn money to support themselves. Paul was a tentmaker by trade, and so he probably worked while others were sleeping in order to make an income. Silas and Timothy must have worked at some occupation, too. They paid for their own meals and rent. They did it not to make a self-righteous point, but in order to make it clear that they were there not to get anything, but to give. It seems to have been especially important when ministry was just beginning, so that new believers would not get a wrong idea about them.

Read verse 10. Paul also describes the quality of their spiritual lives here. They strove to be close to God every day and to live out their faith in their daily lives. The only way to be holy, righteous and blameless is to stay close to Jesus through personal devotions and prayer.

Read verses 11,12. Here Paul changes the metaphor from mothering to fathering. Mothers nurture but fathers discipline. But this is not a harsh discipline. It is encouraging, comforting and urging. Sadly, fathering in many places has become a lost art. So many are not prepared to father others. Some think it is just to use fatherly authority. But here Paul describes fathering as encouraging, comforting and urging. Many fathers love their children but don’t know how to do that spiritually. Spiritual fathering is to help people to live lives worthy of God and of being called into his kingdom and glory.

Read verse 13. Here Paul shifts the focus from the apostles’ ministry to the Thessalonians’ acceptance. The secret of spiritual growth is accepting the word of God. God’s servants should give the word with the right motives, and people also need to accept it as the word of God. But how easy it is to look at God’s servants humanly! How easy to interpret what’s being taught humanly! But the word of God is not like human words. Human words may seem impressive but in the end they’re forgettable. But the word of God is powerful. The word of God continues to work in us long after we hear it. More than anything else, we need to be listening carefully to the word of God. And we need confidence to give people the word of God as it is.

In verses 14,15 Paul shows how the word of God worked in the Thessalonians. It enabled them to share in the sufferings of Christ with all God’s people. It’s our human nature to avoid suffering. But when the word of God works in us, we’re willing to endure suffering and persecution for Jesus’ sake. Paul closes this section by reminding them and us of what happens to those who persecute God’s people (15b,16). In light of this, we should never let persecution intimidate us from speaking to non-believers about Jesus.

Today we learned what an authentic servant of Christ is like. A servant of Christ is especially like a nursing mother caring for her own children. May God bless us to grow through the work of the Holy Spirit as authentic servants of Christ whom God can use in our time.