

Sunday November 1st, 2020

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13
“Encouraging Words and Deeds”

Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish religious philosopher, told a story about a town where only ducks lived. Every Sunday, the ducks would waddle out of their houses, and waddle down Main Street to their church. They waddled into the sanctuary and sat in their proper pews. The duck choir waddled in and took its place, and then the duck minister came forward and opened the duck Bible.

He read to them...Ducks! God has given you wings! With wings you can fly! With wings you can mount up and soar like eagles. No walls can confine you! No fence can hold you! You have wings. God has given you wings and you can fly like birds.” All the ducks shouted “AMEN!” and then they all waddled home. Perhaps, I wonder, if the only thing we have in common with the ducks in the story is the bills we have. Hydro, gas etc.

However, Kierkegaard was certainly onto something that is pervasive in the church. What is it? Some call it, apathy. Others refer to it as indifference. We are all, I am sure, familiar with the consequences. Case in point is a true story I read, that unfortunately has been played out several times before. Winston Moseley died awhile back. Few people would recognize his name. The 81-year-old man spent the last 52 years of his life in prison.

In 1964, Moseley stabbed to death a young woman named Kitty Genovese in a brutal, gruesome killing. As awful as this crime was, what got people’s attention, was the fact that there were 38 witnesses who watched Kitty’s murder, and no one did anything to help her even though she was screaming, “Help me!” It was only after she was dead that anyone bothered to call the police. One of the witnesses later told law enforcement authorities, “I didn’t want to get involved.” ([Washington Post](#), April 5, 2016).

A more recent example is an interview of President Trump where he was asked to comment on the 200,000 plus deaths from the Corona virus and his apathetic response was, “It is what it is”.

It may be hard for us to understand why, such a travesty such as the murder of Kitty Genovese could occur, but indifference or apathy, even if motivated by fear or self-interest, can destroy people, relationships, and yes even churches. Between the lines of Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, you can almost hear the frustration and heart break, because one of the things critics of Paul accused him of was indifference.

They charged that Paul didn’t really care for the Thessalonians, and that he was only in his missionary work for the money and influence he garnered. He was, as mentioned last week, a sophist. This charge against Paul was way off the mark. His critics knew better, and the Thessalonians knew better. Just look at how Paul carried himself as an apostle. He was not an idle man. When he wasn’t preaching, he was working hard to support himself.

We know a bit about Paul’s livelihood. When Paul went to Corinth, the bible says that “Paul ... found a Jew named Aquila ... with his wife Priscilla ... Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them”.

“And they worked together -- by trade they were tentmakers (Acts 18:1–3).” Tent making in Paul’s day was hard work. First the cloth had to be woven, and then the pieces sewed together. The finished product was quite heavy.

Paul was not one to shy away from a hard day’s work. Numerous times throughout his letters he reminds his addressees that he worked while he was among them, not just with “preacherly” duties, but also in the “secular world.” One of these expositions on hard work, occurs in the second chapter of Thessalonians where Paul describes the exemplary conduct of a leader, as he also reveals how the activity of God can transform normal work into something extraordinary.

Paul’s first word in this passage is “remember”, which encourages a review of Paul’s past interactions with the Thessalonians. Previously, adherents of the various Greco-Roman religions (1:9), the Thessalonians heard the good news from Paul, and when they did so, God met them with demonstrations of power through the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:5). This was especially encouraging for Paul who had arrived via Philippi, where he had experienced persecution (1 Thessalonians 12:2) at the hands of the local magicians and magistrates (Acts 17:14-21).

Unfortunately, trouble again followed close at his heels, this time from the leading Jews of the area, who Luke tells us were jealous because of Paul’s missionary success (Acts 17:5). After an uproar, Paul and Silas escaped under the cover of darkness, and went to the city of Berea, about 50 miles to the southwest. Although he wanted to return to the Thessalonians, Paul was unable, so he sent his fellow companion and protégée Timothy, whose report of their enduring faith and love prompted the writing of this letter (3:6).

Despite the good news from the community, the enemies of Paul still posed a real threat. Hence, the charge that Paul is a “man who has upset the world” (Acts 17:6) echoes in the background. Was he worried that the tempter might tempt them (3:5) to question Paul, and therefore question the gospel he brought? To forestall this, he extolls his character. Beginning with the first main sentence in the letter, Paul reminds them of “what kind of men we proved to be among you” (1:5), and his character takes center stage in the verses preceding this passage.

He eliminates any possible negative motivation -- error, impurity, deceit, flattery, glory, or power -- as he establishes his character in two particular ways.

First, he was not a burden to them. Possibly wanting to avoid a negative association with traveling sophists, who I mentioned last week, meaning those who taught morally ambivalent rhetoric and at times became rich from it. Paul asserts that he does not teach for a fee, but provides for himself. A common theme for Paul throughout his writings, he notes that as an apostle he could accept a fee (1 Corinthians 9:12, 14, 18), but he has chosen not to do so (2 Thessalonians 3:7–10; 1 Corinthians 4:11-12, 14–15; 2 Corinthians 11:8–9).

This keeps Paul unbound to the symbiotic system of patronage so vital to the functioning of first century society. He can travel where he wants, and say what needs to be said without upsetting the patron-client dynamic. He was only answerable to God. Moreover, since it seems the Thessalonians have a tendency toward laziness (1 Thessalonians 4:11–12; 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).

Paul may have been particularly concerned to show them the example of continuing hard work even in light of the immanent return of Jesus. Paul's method is a good reminder for ministers today of the possible messy entailments of being paid for proclaiming the word of God. Nevertheless, his example certainly cannot be used as an excuse to demand that preachers teach for free.

As Paul says that with the Lord's support, those who proclaim the gospel should be supported by it (1 Corinthians 9:14). He even encourages the Thessalonians to appreciate and esteem those who labor among them (1 Thessalonians 5:12), which surely has financial ramifications. His decision not to be a financial burden to his communities, promotes the use of wisdom when accepting funds, but does not prohibit the reception of funds altogether.

Second, Paul defends his character with his assertions that he is not bringing his own message, but God's. Paul proclaims his deep thanksgiving that when the Thessalonians heard him, they perceived this truth (verse 13). Hence, his blameless conduct points to something greater. It provides evidence of the transformation the message he is bringing has affected in his own life. His greatest desire is that they never lose sight of the truth of what *God* was saying to them for which Paul only served as the messenger.

Paul has reminded the Thessalonians of his work. He was like a father to each of them, encouraging, exhorting, and testifying to them so that they might live worthy lives (2:11–12). Like a father would do, he was preaching the word *of God* and also labouring (presumably as a tent maker) so that he wouldn't be a financial burden to them, his children in the faith. With this energetic lifestyle, he is embodying and demonstrating an analogous characteristic of God.

While Paul has been at work *among* them, God has also been at work *in* them (2:13), calling them to be members of the kingdom and participants in his glory (2:12). Because God has brought them from death to life (1:9), from inactivity to activity, they, too, have a work to perform. They have already demonstrated a *working* faith, a *laboring* love, and an *enduring* hope (1:2), and now Paul is calling them to be his imitators (2:14), persisting in both spiritual and mundane work.

For once you have become a member of God's kingdom, all of your life falls under his authority and contributes to his glory. Invigorated by the active God, everything from making tents to evangelism can serve the needs of the believing community, and the kingdom of the God, in whom the community members believe. I appreciate the value of what Paul is laying out for us. Maybe it is a belief not so prevalent anymore, but some people believe there is a hierarchy of activity in God's Kingdom.

There was a sense that unless you were a minister or missionary, the only real value of your labour was to earn income to support the work of the "real, full time servants of God." I can remember distinctly as a child growing up, the reverent awe many felt when a missionary came to visit our church and told amazing stories of their work. We were told over and over again that this was the height of service to God. And lest you think it was only laity who felt this way, I assure you that those in full time Christian service sometimes carried that same aura of superiority.

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Chuck Swindoll in his book, "Growing up strong in the Seasons of Life, related what his encounters with a colleague in ministry was like for him. This other servant of God was well known, well-traveled, and the ministry he was involved in touched many lives. He took on a great deal of responsibility and logged a great deal of time in the limelight. This is what Swindoll said about his colleague.

"You got the distinct impression that when the two of you were together, the more important one was not you. Little mistakes irked him. Slight omissions irritated him. The attitude of a servant was conspicuous by its absence. It was highly important to him that everyone knew who he was, where he'd been, how he's done, and what he thought.

While everyone else preferred to be on a first-name basis (rather than "Reverend" or "Mister") he demanded, "Call me Doctor." His voice had a professional tone. As humorous things occurred, he found no reason to smile, and as the group became closer and closer in spirit, he increasingly became more threatened." Swindoll says that he was sorely tempted to order a beer sent to his room, or short sheet his bed, or put in a wakeup call for 2:30AM. (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, p.465)

I have said before that as a child growing up, I was terrified of the ministers of our church. They seemed so aloof, and when I did speak to them, it was usually about something I had done wrong like running with my friends in the sanctuary. The minister's office was an absolute no-go zone, and it felt naughty just to peek in the door. Having now been a member of the clergy for 33 years, I now know that these well-meaning ministers were just as vulnerable, and struggling like everyone else. I know because I experience these feelings myself.

Paul's defense of himself is a reminder that all labour can be done for the glory of God. We talk a great deal about a calling in ministry. As a pastor, I have been asked many times about my "calling". Our CBOQ credentials committee, which approves candidates for ordination, takes a very dim view if a candidate is unsure, or cannot articulate how they know they were called to ministry. Over the years I have heard stories of candidates who have said some very odd things before the committee.

Most often those who struggled with their calling, were well-meaning people who wanted to serve God, and felt that full time ministry was the only way. To me this is tragic, and it sends a bad message to the whole of the church family. I might shock you by saying to you that everyone has a calling to serve God. Whatever your vocation is, or even if you are now retired, God has called you to serve.

It is not about preaching, or leading bible studies, or even volunteering in outreach efforts, which can all be part of your calling. It is all about being salt and light wherever God leads you. If you are a teacher, you are called to bring God's salt and light into the school. If you are a business owner, you are called to serve with integrity and with the best interests of your employees and customers front and center.

If you are retired, then you are likely called to take your care and concern for others to whatever activity you are undertaking.

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There is no reason, entertainment and socialization, cannot also carry grace and love for others. We need to think of our lives, in their entirety as a calling.

We have been placed here at this time and in this place for God's grand project. So, how might we imitate Paul in seeing our lives as a calling. I am not a big fan of Robert Schuller but he wrote a little piece that captures what I think might help us see things from God's perspective. It is entitled *Anyway*, from his book, "Tough Times Never Last but Tough People Do". Schuller writes...

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered. LOVE THEM ANYWAY!

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. DO GOOD ANYWAY!

If you are successful you win false friends and true enemies. SUCCEED ANYWAY!

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. DO GOOD ANYWAY!

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. BE HONEST AND FRANK ANYWAY!

People favour underdogs but follow top dogs. FIGHT FOR SOME UNDERDOGS ANYWAY!

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. BUILD ANYWAY!

People really need help but may attack you if you help them. HELP PEOPLE ANYWAY!

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. GIVE THE WORLD THE BEST YOU'VE GOT ANYWAY!

All of us are called, equipped, and blessed by God: to make a difference, regardless of any personal rewards. The world should be, and is, a better place for us being in it. I just thought you should know that.