

Share the Way, the Truth and the Life

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Sharing the Wealth: Part 1

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Sunday, July 15, 2007

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Our text from I Thessalonians says today, as you know, “We dealt with each of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you, and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God--that is, that you walk worthy of God’s life.”

Today, we will answer the question that is in your Brunch Bunch Questions, No. 2. We will describe the way, the ways in which Paul and his friends shared the Good News of Jesus with the people in Thessalonica, and how we are called to share the Good News of the Gospel with people in our lives. The heart of this text is: “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the Gospel of God but also our very selves.”

Let us pray. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, may you communicate your Good News by the power of your Spirit and the love of your Father—that we might have the freedom and the courage to share the Good News through our words, our actions, and our tone. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

How should we share the Good News of the Gospel with the people around us? The very first thing the Apostle Paul says is that they went to the people; they did not expect the people to come to them. We are in a major shift in the life of the church historically, where we must go out to where people are and not expect people to show up where we are. That’s a great transformation of the nature of the church. Some people call that the mission of the church. People just don’t show up in church anymore because it is a part of the behavior pattern. It is like the apostolic age: we must go out and be among the people – to share with them who Jesus is, and who we are, as people who follow Jesus. It is a personal invitation; a personal engagement; a personal process of following through; a building of relationships. It is all about person-to-person validation. We are beyond the age where we can throw out a general announcement, and people will just flock in. We are each responsible to be people who go to others with the Good News – in word, in deed, and in tone.

Recently, a pastor called me up and invited me, because I was scheduled to be at his church to do a wedding. He personally called me up and invited me to come: “I wanted you to feel comfortable so that you would understand what our church is about. You are welcome to be here. I will greet you when you come in the door. I want you to feel at home.” That made a huge difference in my sense of connecting with that wedding in another church in Northern Virginia. He not only called, but he met me in his office to welcome me. He was gracious to me, and we got into a conversation because it seemed that he was getting close to retirement. We were talking about being pastors and moving toward retirement (that’s not what I am trying to deliver as the message today). He said, “Well, seeing that you have an interest in this conversation, I have a book that I would like to recommend to you. Let me go home and get it. I think you will find it of very much help to you at this point of your life.” And so, I said, “O.K.” Later on, after the wedding, I came into his office, and there the book was. It was entitled, *Aging Well, Thank You Very Much*. In addition to invitation, he was of personal help to me.

It makes all the difference if we present ourselves as people who are inviting others to experience our God and Jesus Christ – that we are the witnesses and examples. How shall we share this Gospel? Well, one of the things right away that Paul says, is that they shared it with great opposition – in the context that people provided resistance. Whenever we go out and share the Good News of Christ (and we share the Good News in this culture, which tends to be resistant for all sorts of reasons), there will be opposition. Not everybody is anxious to listen, or to engage a conversation around faith. But Paul says that they did so with a gentle persistence, a patient assertiveness, a kindness in their proclamation. They did not let the

opposition drive their reaction to who they were becoming in the conversation. As you know, in resistance and oppositions, it is easy to go to the defensive side of things. We do not have to be defensive. Nor do we have to be offensive – as some people who get pushy about sharing the Gospel can become.

To illustrate the opposition that they had in Thessalonica, which was unusually difficult, according to the Book of Acts, chapter 17, Paul and Silas went into the synagogue; for three weeks they shared who Jesus was, and that Jesus is the Messiah. And they said that some of the people in the synagogue were persuaded; a great many of the devout Greeks were persuaded; and not just a few, but a lot of the leading women, were persuaded. But some of the old-school believers became jealous about the attention they were getting. They formed a mob of hoodlums, turned the city into an uproar, formed a lynch party for Paul and Silas, attacked the home where they were staying, and accused them of wrongdoing. They drove them out of Thessalonica. And not only that, when they heard that they were in Berea, they traveled to Berea and drove them out of Berea—a huge amount of resistance. The point Paul is making here is that they were kind, persevering, and persistent in the presence of resistance. They did not let opposition shut down their presence, nor their voices.

A third way in which they shared the Gospel – the Good News – was they did it without deceit; without wrong motive; without trickery, or flattery, or greed; or a need for approval; and without pretext. They had no hidden agenda. They simply said, “We are here to talk about the Messiah, the Christ Jesus.” They did not try to seduce, or manipulate, or leverage, or intimidate, or threaten people into the Kingdom. They simply presented the Gospel and themselves. They shared the Gospel by example, by influence, by relationship, and by proclamation. And they stayed away from double messages: things that were inconsistent between what they said and how they acted. Because they knew that the Gospel was greatly developed around the integrity of their words matching their actions. Words that did not match the work, or the tone, were not acceptable to them. They couldn’t quote Scripture within the context of being angry, undisciplined, pushing, controlling, or passive-aggressive. They said: “We must be gracious, loving people in the presence of those who may, or may not, respond well to us.”

In this book that I was so graciously given to borrow, *Aging Well*, by George Vaillant, there is a study by Harvard University about the process of adult development: the contrast between those who age well and those who don’t age well – summarized, according to the author’s own experience as he was driving through the State of Idaho, where he saw a bumper sticker that read, “My God is alive and well. Sorry to hear about yours.” His point is this: some Christians define themselves as older and against other people – as being exclusive to them, rather than including them and encouraging them to engage in conversation. People who don’t age well, he points out, are people who are preoccupied with religion; with dogma; with doctrine; and they are adolescent in their faith. They are more concerned about being right than they are about being gracious and loving; and, by the way, both concepts are important in the Gospel. But one grows up, hopefully, and becomes a person who is right in a gracious and loving way. The way he defined this is that the ones who do not age well draw a circle that draws people out. Those who do age well draw a circle that draws people in.

Are you around anyone who is aging poorly? As a Christian, they draw their circle, and you feel left out. The distortion of the Good News, all too often, is what blocks other people from being attracted to Jesus. As you may know, we are in the midst of Harry Potter mania. The fifth movie came out on July 11th, and the seventh book comes out next Saturday night at midnight. Don’t miss it; the author’s name is Rowling, by the way. The significance of what she writes in the book, according to her own words, is that her books present a choice between what is right and what is easy. Tyranny starts, she says, with people being apathetic and taking the easy way... on the road... on the way... to deep trouble. It is ironic that the *Time* magazine article on this book reflected a hacker who intervened on June 18th, calling himself ‘Gabriel,’ saying that he had stolen the text of the seventh book and had posted the key plot line to give it away – so that there would be no surprise on July 21st. He framed his actions as a Christian who is in counter-attack against neo-paganism; and he said, ‘We make this spoiler to make the reading of the upcoming book useless and boring.’

Some Christians define themselves as what they can do to attack the opposition, rather than what they can do to invite those who are seeking. Paul is talking about invitation, not opposition. John Augsburg, another Presbyterian pastor, says, in his book, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, “There are distortions that

we often model in the name of Jesus.” He gives five questions identifying those distortions: Am I becoming inauthentic? Am I becoming judgmental, exclusive, or proud? Am I becoming less approachable? Am I growing weary of spiritual growth because I’m looking at it so hard and I haven’t attained it? Am I measuring the spiritual life in superficial ways (such as: How much do I go to church? How much do I read the Bible? How much do I go to meetings? How much do I write in a journal? How many times a day do I pray?) These are superficial ways of measuring how we witness to Christ. His point is this: that your life—who you are, what you do, and how you say what you say—communicates the Gospel in a stronger way than just the words themselves.

A fourth way that Paul calls us to share the Gospel is that we are approved by God; we are handpicked by God. That is one of the messages that came through at the Vacation Bible School with the children this past week: that they are handpicked agents of God, and that we are here to train them in how to be ambassadors to Christ. God wants you... all of you—your entire being, who you are, how you are gifted—to be the witness. Paul gives an illustration: that it is like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children—to be a gentle presence among other people; not pushy or demanding; not using intimidation or control, but saying the words, ‘We deeply care for you, and you are dear to us.’ Paul, quite often in the Epistles, contrasts: “I could have been bold and tell you what to do, but rather I began to appeal to you on the basis of love.” This is what he says to Philemon in his letter about Onesimus It is how we are human to each other in the way of Jesus.

This example of the concept of nurse became very evident to me as I was taken into surgery in 1992. I was greeted at the door of the preparation room by a nurse I really thought was in disguise as a sergeant. She said: “You must do this. You must put this on; you must get ready; you must be prepared.” I felt like surgery boot camp. I said, “Yes, ma’am.” She said, “By the way, I’m a member of your church, and don’t forget it.” I didn’t. After surgery, there was a whole different style. The same nurse was with me in recovery. “Ah, you’re doing just fine. Everything is going to be O.K. You came through very well. Take your time to recover. I’m praying for you, and I’m here for you.”

Paul talks about both sides of what it means to provide guidance and direction; nurture and support: to be like a father giving encouragement and pleading with his children; like a nurse that speaks tenderly to her children and gives them support—to be a witness that is human, that has relationships that build confidence and trust; to share yourself, your presence, your trustworthiness, your kindness, your vulnerability, your patience, your forbearance—and when you do the wrong thing, your freedom to confess and say, “I did that wrong; it is not right. I’m sorry.” It is not only what you say; it’s what you do—how you say and do. But, most of all, it’s who you are, particularly for children. We don’t remember the words typically and the exact statements of our teachers growing up; but we often do not forget their presence. And it’s their presence that convinces us that God is love.

Paul goes on to say that he doesn’t load any people down with heavy burdens. How do we share the Good News? We don’t pile responsibilities onto people. In fact, the Good News is about relieving people of the heavy burdens of life, treating them well, not loading them down with rules and expectations, sharing the message, the truth, and the life of Jesus. How should we share the Gospel, according to Paul? By being one who urges and encourages; one who pleads with others to walk in life as worthy people, like God.

Recently I was talking with a father who was quite upset because he had mistreated his children. He said, “Lately I have been on edge. I have been angry and I have been blaming and complaining. I’ve been pushing my children who are too young to understand why I’m doing what I’m doing. And I finally just stopped, caught myself and confessed to my kids, ‘Daddy doesn’t know why he’s doing what he’s doing. Can you forgive me?’” I tell you that moment will register more deeply than all the Gospel stories that the children hear from Dad in a lifetime.

And so it is. How will we share the Gospel of Jesus Christ? We share it as human beings, in our awareness of reality—the fullness of who we are, in our freedom to grow and change—so that people not only hear the words... they sense the tone. They read the person, and it registers as truth. Share the wealth of the Gospel. Share the story of Jesus. Share your own story of faith, but share yourself as one whom God loves, and is free to love other people. My question for you today is: Are you sharing God’s wealth, or are you sharing your own poverty?

Let us pray: Help us, Lord Jesus Christ, to walk with you and see the wealth of who you are—that we might be transformed into your likeness and relieved from sharing the poverty of our own lost humanity. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.