

MORE THAN WORDS

1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

Since this is my last sermon in an official capacity as a pastor of Emmanuel Bible Church, I was told that I could preach on whatever I wanted. So, I have decided to preach from a passage that, for decades, has shaped my own philosophy of ministry. I have entitled it, “More Than Words.”

In one of his letters Paul said, “*If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, that is, an elder who has spiritual oversight in a local church, he desires a noble task (1 Tim. 3:1).*” Indeed, being an overseer *is* a noble task. It is an extremely *important* task; it is an eternally *consequential* task. But it is not a task for the faint-hearted. It is not an undertaking for those who are fragile or insecure. It is not a job for those who have a *need* to be liked or who get their feelings hurt easily or who cannot handle criticism.

Because if there is one thing that all overseers have in common, no matter their likability or leadership style or level of skill or competence, it is that they *will* be scrutinized and criticized and misinterpreted and misunderstood. There might be a honeymoon period in which this does not happen, but it most certainly *will* happen if the leader stays in that position for any length of time, even if he is doing a good job; even if he is Spirit-controlled and Spirit-led. It comes with the job.

It happened to Moses; it happened to King David, it happened to Jesus. And it happened to the Apostle Paul. He writes about it in more than one of his letters, including this letter to the Thessalonian church. That’s because several in the local Jewish community who had been offended by his teaching had leveled some serious charges against his character, accusing him of being a charlatan—a deceitful, manipulative windbag.

They accused Paul and Silas of coming into town and setting off a bunch of spiritual fireworks, but when the smoke cleared, they were nowhere to be found. Come to find out, they had slipped out the back door of the city in the middle of the night and were last seen heading to Berea. And they were saying, “See? Paul and Silas are flakes! They get people all excited, get what they want out of them, and then skip town.”

Now it’s true, Paul and Silas had been forced to leave after only three weeks in Thessalonica. But their ministry was not a bunch of smoke and mirrors. The Spirit of God had been at work—opening spiritually blind eyes and deaf ears, softening hard hearts, healing wounded souls, and transforming lives. There had been dozens of conversions to Christ, and what they left behind was an authentic, vibrant, growing church—a church that, in chapter 1, Paul calls a *model* church (1:7).

And yet after Paul and Silas left, a fair amount of time had elapsed since they had seen or communicated with the Thessalonians. It wasn’t for lack of interest or concern. It’s just that they were ministering elsewhere and didn’t have cell phone or Gmail accounts.

But sometimes when there is a lack of communication people begin to wonder. They start filling in the gaps by letting their imaginations run wild, which often leads them to jump to conclusions. That was beginning to happen in the Thessalonian church. They didn’t want to believe the slanderous rumors the Judaizers were spreading about Paul and Silas, but some of their reasoning did sound convincing. “Maybe they weren’t as sincere as we thought. Maybe we actually got bamboozled by a couple of sweet-talking swindlers. After all, how well can you get to know people after just three weeks?”

And so, Paul is writing to refresh their memories. He wanted to remind them of some things that proved they could be trusted and that their message was true. And he did so in a very interesting way. He could have flashed his badge that proved they were genuine

apostles; he could have shown them a lengthy list of their credentials, he could have sent letters of reference from the spiritual Who's Who in Jerusalem in order to impress them with just how important they were and how privileged they were to have ever met them. But he didn't.

Instead, he simply reminded them of the way he and Silas conducted themselves in their presence. And that alone was sufficient to prove the authenticity of their message and the integrity of their character.

Look what he says in **verses 1-12**. *For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. ² But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. ³ For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, ⁴ but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. ⁵ For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. ⁶ Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. ⁷ But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. ⁸ So, 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.*

⁹ For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. ¹⁰ You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. ¹¹ For you know how, like a father with his children, ¹² we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

If it sounds like Paul is defending himself in this passage it's because he was. Not because he was hurt; not even because he wanted to vindicate himself. But because he wanted to establish the veracity of the message they preached. And he knew that it was impossible for people to separate the message from the messengers; that the credibility of the message was inextricably linked to the credibility of the messengers. And so, he mentions several things that proved his and Silas' credibility.

First, he says in **verse 1**. *For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain.* Or, literally, "You yourselves have *discerned* or *concluded* that our coming to you was not in vain." Paul reminds them that when he and Silas were ministering among them, they saw unmistakably supernatural things with their own eyes. They witnessed divine power when the gospel was being preached and were still seeing evidence of that power. Yes, Paul and Silas' time with them was brief, but it was not in vain. For how else could they explain the genuine transformations that took place in their lives?

The first thing that validated Paul and Silas' message and ministry is that it was accompanied by divine power.

Verse 2. *² But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.*

You remember what happened to Paul and Silas in Philippi. They were arrested, stripped, publicly flogged, thrown in jail, and fastened in stocks. Think of the shame, not to mention the pain, of that experience. But then remember the earthquake, and the dramatic conversion of the Philippian jailer, and their subsequent release? Acts 16 tells us that no sooner were they released from jail than they set out for Thessalonica. Picture this now: Two,

middle aged men, exhausted from a sleepless night, limping down the road; bruises all over their bodies; still feeling the sting of the lacerations on their backs; tired, stiff, sore.

What do you think was going through their minds? I'm pretty sure I know what I'd be thinking. Now would be a good time to retire from active ministry. At the very least take a sabbatical. Perhaps write a book about my Philippian experience, hit the testimony circuit, and become a Christian celebrity. Or, I might keep going, but at least change my strategy...dramatically. Learn to tone it down. Learn to be more diplomatic and less dogmatic. "After all," I could reason, "God won't be able to use me much if I'm always getting beat up or thrown behind bars."

But Paul and Silas' traumatic experience in Philippi did nothing to dampen their enthusiasm or diminish their sense of urgency to preach the gospel in new places. Why? Because they were motivated by something far different than personal comfort. On one occasion Paul said, "*I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace*" (Acts 20:24). And he said in another place, "*For the love of Christ compels us...*" (2 Cor. 5:14). It was Christ's love that motivated and energized them, so much so that they could not stay still or keep silent.

But they were also motivated by Christ's love for *others* who, unless they heard the gospel, would be ignorant of that love and who would experience eternal punishment. And Jesus had put His love for those lost souls in their own hearts, so much so that they were willing to endure whatever difficulties and make whatever sacrifices to win them to Christ.

Which leads me to say that if, when you think of the Apostle Paul, you primarily think of Him as someone who sat in an ivory tower writing theological treatises on such themes as predestination, you've misread the New Testament. Paul was compelled by the love of Christ for him and propelled by the love Christ had put into his heart for people. Love, more than anything else, is what his life was all about.

The second thing that validated Paul and Silas' ministry to the Thessalonians was they would not be deterred from their divinely appointed task of reaching people with the good news, in spite of painful experiences and stiff opposition.

Let's move on to **verse 3-4**. ³*For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive,* ⁴*but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.*

Paul and Silas did not have ulterior motives or hidden agendas. They were simply fulfilling the assignment that God had given them to do. And they did it with utmost integrity—not so they could win men's approval or promote their own interests. They had integrity because they desperately wanted to please the One they worked for, the One who sent them. Therefore, they were sincere and truthful because those are His standards—He expects nothing less from those who speak for Him.

Verse 5. ⁵*For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness.* In other words, we didn't pour on the charm because we were after your money or anything else. Furthermore, **verse 6a**. ⁶*Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.* We were not looking for esteem, applause, or even a pat on the back. Nor were we seeking special treatment. You yourselves know that we never had a sense of entitlement.

The third thing that validated Paul and Silas' message and ministry among the Thessalonians was their utmost integrity. There were no self-serving motives in their relationships or their appeals. Even though they were genuine apostles and could have insisted that the Thessalonians treat them like VIP's or compensate them for their ministry.

But they wouldn't think of throwing their weight around, because it would have created a gap between them and the people that would have been hard to bridge.

Look at **verse 7**. *⁷ But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.* Gentle. It's the opposite of being demanding or imposing or intimidating. Paul is contrasting an assertiveness that is typically associated with an Apostle with a gentleness that is universally associated with a nursing mother, a metaphor that signifies profound tenderness and care.

He continues in **verse 8**, *⁸ So, 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.*

The word translated "affectionately desirous" is an interesting word, and this is the only place it is used in the New Testament. Which means scholars had to look to sources outside the Scriptures to discover its meaning. And one of the places they found the word was on a grave inscription of a small child describing the feelings of the bereaved parents who longed to have that child back again. It means "to yearn for", "to earnestly desire", and it depicts a deep, affectionate, emotional attachment.

Paul is describing his and Silas' feelings for the Thessalonian believers. They were endeared to them. They were emotionally attached to them. So much so that their ministry was more than just coming into town and proclaiming a message. Oh, that message was important—it was what they needed to hear in order to have eternal life—but that message was *validated* by the deep, affectionate bond that was created in the three weeks they spent together.

Years ago, I wondered about Paul's statement in verse 8—that these people had become "dear" to him and Silas in just three weeks. I didn't doubt that it was true. I just wondered how it was possible to become deeply endeared to people you have known for such a short time.

But I now know what he's talking about because we've experienced this. For nearly twenty years Mindy and I have travelled to various places overseas to train and equip pastors and teachers. And wherever we go, we *inevitably* become endeared to people we meet in those places, which is remarkable because we have very little in common except our relationship with the Lord Jesus. But even though we come from different backgrounds and cultures, in the few days we are together we develop an affection for each other and a bond of friendship that is astonishingly deep and strong, so much so that tears are sometimes shed when we say our goodbyes. So much so that we are compelled to pray for each other and stay in touch with each other. Rarely does a day go by that I don't hear from one or more of these friends in faraway places.

But I assure you that this affectionate bond does not happen automatically. It only happens because we are intentional about getting to know these individuals personally. We seek them out at mealtimes or during breaks or before and after sessions. We learn and remember their names (at least I do); we ask about their spouses and their children, their churches, their farms. We ask them to tell us how they came to know Christ. We ask them about their challenges and struggles. And we always pray together.

That is the only way to become endeared to people—to develop this kind of affectionate longing. It's by sharing our lives, getting to know each other, and developing *personal* relationships. I assure you, this is how Paul and Silas became endeared to the Thessalonians after just three weeks.

I heard some good advice from Dr. Earl Palmer, who was a very personable pastor even though he served in very large churches. He said, "When I meet someone for the first

time, I treat them as if we are going to be good friends for the rest of our lives.” He did that with me, when, as a young pastor, I had lunch with him one day at a conference at which he was speaking. I saw him do that when we visited his church in Seattle and he was talking to people in the foyer.

That’s how you become endeared to people. You give them your undivided attention. You get to know them, because for a Spirit-controlled Christ follower, to know someone *is* to love them. That is also how you show people that they are important to you and that you really care about them.

So, think about this: If that’s how Paul and Silas felt after three weeks, if that is how Mindy and I feel after just a few days with African pastors, imagine how endeared we are to you, since we’ve been with you for over 26 years! We feel enormous affection for you that only gets stronger as the weeks go by, especially because we have been through so much together—the ups and downs, through thick and thin, during the joyous celebrations of life and during the dark nights of the soul.

We feel that affection every Sunday. My heart wells up within me when Mark or Jeff Kuenzi cross the aisle and talk to me before the service, or when four-year old Rosalie Sullivan comes up to me after every service, wraps her arms around my legs, and says, “I love you, Pastor Stan!” or when Quinton Gehring walks by and gives me a fist bump without even looking up. I get positively giddy when we have our children’s offering on the fourth Sunday and get to see a zillion kids loitering on the platform, or when those kids lead us in singing (like they’ve done the last two Sundays).

And don’t let me get started about my feelings for Gladys—our 98-year-old matriarch, or 99-year-old Harold and his young wife Jean, or Marie, or Deloris, or Terry and Arlene. And there are a number of newer people about whom I have this affectionate bond, including 90-year-old Mary Woodard, who asked if she could go with us on our next trip to Africa. And if you think she wasn’t serious you don’t know Mary.

Actually, if we had time, I could list almost a thousand names (which is the number of people who now call this their church home) to whom I feel deeply endeared, which, by the way, is why I have made the effort to learn your names. It’s also why I can’t keep my hands off of most of you when I see you. I hope I haven’t offended anyone with my hugs or my pats on the shoulder or my cradling of your head in my hand. I cannot help it. I love you so much that I’ve not only preached the Word to you as best as I can, but I’ve given you my heart, because you have become so dear to me.

Someone asked me recently what my legacy at Emmanuel Bible Church would be. Of course, I cannot know for sure. But I think it *might* be that I loved you deeply, and you knew it.

The fourth thing that validated Paul and Silas’ message and ministry in Thessalonica is the deep, affectionate bond of friendship with the people.

We don’t have time to look in depth at the last few verses of this passage. So, let me read it and make a few brief comments. **Verse 9** ⁹ *For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.*

You probably know that when staying in a new city, it was Paul’s custom to earn a living by making tents so that he would not have to be dependent on anyone and so he could provide for his needs and the needs of his companions. He did this so that no one could say to them, “They’re in it for the money,” or “they’re freeloaders.” Instead, they worked extremely hard in order to pay their own way.

Verse 10. ¹⁰ *You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless*

was our conduct toward you believers. Paul is simply saying that the people could see for themselves, and even God was their witness, that their motives were pure, and their conduct was above reproach.

Verses 11-12. *¹¹ For you know how, like a father with his children, ¹² we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.*

Paul and Silas' ministry among the Thessalonians was not just validated by their motherly tenderness, verse 7, but by a fatherly firmness. One of the words used in verse 12 describes assertive instruction or correction. It means to say *what* needs to be said, *when* it needs to be said, even if it stings the person to *whom* it is being said. That's not easy for many pastors, including me, especially when you know that the sting can be interpreted as authoritarianism or harshness or a lack of compassion. But just as a father's firmness is necessary for a child's well-being, so is fatherly firmness necessary in a spiritual leader—just as necessary, in fact, as tender affection and compassion.

Paul has given a defense of his and Silas' ministry to the Thessalonian Church. Their credibility and trustworthiness were rooted in their attitudes and conduct, which revealed a deep love, and which manifest itself in utmost integrity, hard work, and pure motives. Because ministry is *more than words*. Words are important, words can be powerful, but they are validated by an authentic life, a life in which Jesus expresses Himself through the messenger, so that people get to experience Him.

Incidentally, if I have done this in my tenure as a pastor at Emmanuel Bible Church, praise the Lord. It is His doing. But here's the good news. Pastor Brad, Pastor Grant, and Pastor Michael have all these characteristics, not to mention our elders and deacons, including arguably or most effective pastor, Kim Spalding. So there. By God's grace, EBC is in good hands going forward, so that Christ may be seen by all.

More Than Words

I Thessalonians 2:1-12

Main Idea: The authenticity and credibility of a divinely appointed spiritual leader is proven by utmost integrity, sincere love, and hard work.

Proof of Authenticity (1-8)

Accompanied by Divine Power (1)

Battered but not Deterred (2)

Utmost Integrity (3-6a)

Apostolic Assertiveness vs. Motherly Tenderness (6b-7)

Deep Affection (8)

Working Hard Night and Day (9)

Above Reproach (10)

A Paternal Role (11-12)