



IMITATOR • Christ-like Ministry

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

1 Thessalonians 2:1-3:13

Backstory

Just prior to coming to Thessalonica, Paul and Silas had been severely beaten at Philippi (Acts 16:22-24). Their arrival in Thessalonica is probably about a week later, as the journey between the two cities was approximately 90 miles. Paul's physical condition was likely not greatly improved by the time he reached Thessalonica, as a Roman flogging was a serious, painful punishment, and a long journey would not be the ideal way to heal. This gives verse 2 much deeper meaning – they had boldly declared the gospel in spite of their condition and the potential of further conflict.

We learn from Acts 17:2 that Paul reasoned in the synagogue on three Sabbath days. There is some debate on whether or not they remained in the city for only those three weeks or were there a bit longer. Whatever the case, it is clear that their time there was short, almost certainly less than three months and perhaps as short as three weeks. A lot must have happened in that time! Many new believers came to faith in Christ, began to rapidly grow in their faith under the teaching of Paul and his companions, and a thriving church took root. Their ministry certainly was not in vain (1 Thes. 2:1)! Paul also comments that they shared their whole lives with the Thessalonians (2:8), something we may naturally be reluctant to do given the short-term nature of a summer project. All this is encouraging news for WSN summer projects, which last about five weeks – the same basic time frame as Paul's trip. A lot can happen during your time in country!

Paul's Defense

These two chapters serve as an eloquent defense of Paul's ministry. We don't know the exact nature of why he needed to defend himself, but by adding up the many points he makes about the integrity of his ministry, we can come up with a picture of some of the things he was accused of. It appears that there were people who accused him of being a religious charlatan who sought merely financial profit, something not uncommon to that age.

Generally, we can break down his defense into three categories: Love, Conduct and Motives. These naturally overlap one another quite a bit.

Love

- Boldness to preach in spite of suffering (2:2)
- Not using flattery, speaking difficult things for them to hear (2:5)
- Gentle love as a mother (2:7)
- Sharing lives as well as the gospel – they weren't just a ministry project (2:8)

Continued on page 2

What's the Big Idea?

Paul defends his ministry among the Thessalonians by citing his sacrificial love, godly conduct and pure motives in ministering among them. His example imitates the example of Christ and His earthly ministry. Ministers of the gospel are called to follow His supreme example, ministering to others with deep, selfless love, integrity in conduct and pure, eternal motivation. This type of ministry is rooted in a deep relationship with Christ, enabling His heart to overflow into ours.

What's the Problem?

Impure motives undercut ministry. They may include greed, selfish ambition or personal gain, a desire for recognition from man and viewing people as a project rather than loving and sharing life with them. It is a constant battle for us to set these motives aside for the sake of God's glory.



- Fatherly love in exhortation and encouragement (2:11-12)
- Thankfulness for their reception of word, endurance of suffering (2:13-16)
- Longing to see them again (2:17-18, 3:10, 11)
- Sending of Timothy (3:1-5)
- Comfort, life, thankfulness, joy in knowing of their faith (3:6-9)
- Prayer for their love and holiness (3:11-13)

Some of the language Paul uses in illustrating his love for them is striking: “very dear to us”, “we were torn away”, “bear it no longer”.

Conduct

- No flattery or pretext for greed (2:5)
- Labor and toil to avoid being a burden (2:9)
- Holy, righteous, blameless conduct among them (2:10)

Motives

- Appeal not from error, impurity, or attempt to deceive (2:3)
- Seeking to please God, not man (2:4, 6)
- Motive of eternal rewards (2:19-20)

Paul states that they are his hope, joy, crown and glory before the Lord at His coming. The theme of eternal rewards as a legitimate motivation for ministry comes forward here. We know from other New Testament passages on this subject that we’re called to be good stewards of our lives and to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven. Those who are faithful and wise stewards will be rewarded in the new heavens and earth. It’s not clear exactly what these treasures or rewards are, but it is clear that our stewardship, either good or poor, effects how we are rewarded; our service for Christ in obedience to His calling and commands leads to eternal treasures; these rewards will amplify our service and worship of the Lord; and it is perfectly good and acceptable to be motivated by eternal rewards to serve Christ.

I Thessalonians 3:3

A brief detour is made from the main thrust of the study to examine the concept of being destined for trials and affliction. Conflict, trials and hardship are inevitable on an international summer project, and this interlude gives your team the opportunity to process some of the trials you’ve already faced, prepare for those to come and re-orient your perspective on the purpose God has for them.

Imitating Christ

We see reflections of the earthly ministry of Christ in Paul’s ministry. Even a brief contemplation of Jesus’ life and ministry calls to mind countless examples of His sacrificial love, pure and holy lifestyle and motivation of eternal rewards. Paul’s model for ministry clearly was the Lord Jesus, and we can surmise from Paul’s life that his ministry was fueled by his deep relationship with Christ.

In John 15:1-11, Jesus speaks of Himself as the true vine and us the branches, calling us to abide in Him, for “apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) This study ends by calling us to abide in Christ and allow Him to do His work through us, for we cannot be fruitful ministers of the gospel on our own.

What’s Our Response?

Paul’s statement in I Corinthians 11:1, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ”, calls us to see his ministry as an extension of his relationship with Christ. His motivation and model for ministry are an imitation of the Lord’s. We too can model our ministry after Paul’s, and ultimately, Christ’s. We should examine any impure motives for ministry in our hearts and bring them before the Lord. We can then be encouraged to pursue the example of sacrificial love, godly conduct and eternal motivation seen in this passage, obtained as we abide in Christ and allow His heart to overflow into ours. There is a natural connection with the lesson from chapter one of evangelism overflowing naturally from a rich encounter with Christ.

Conclude the study by encouraging the students to reflect on how they’re abiding in Christ, and how abiding in Him overflows into fruitful ministry.

What Are the Questions?

I Thessalonians 2:1-3:13

LAUNCH

It is said that “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery”. Who are some people that you try to imitate? What about them do you seek to imitate?

EXPLORE

Read I Thessalonians 2:1-3:13.

1. What are some observations about these chapters? What themes are present? What's Paul's main point in this section of his letter?
2. What accusations were possibly made against Paul? How does he defend himself?
3. What examples of his deep love for the Thessalonians does Paul cite? His upright conduct? His motives for ministry?
4. How long was Paul's visit to Thessalonica? What was his physical condition when he was there?
5. What message is Paul trying to convey by comparing himself with both a mother and a father?
6. What does it mean that they shared not only the gospel, but also their lives?
7. In 2:19-20, Paul tells of his motivation of eternal rewards in investing in their lives. How are people our hope, joy, crown and glory?
8. Verse 3:3 indicates that we're destined for trials and affliction. If we're destined for them, we can assume God has a purpose for them. What trials have we faced this summer?
9. How does your outlook on them change considering the fact that we're destined for them? What can we learn from God through them?
10. In I Co 11:1, Paul says, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” What significance is there in the fact that Paul's ministry imitated Christ's?
11. What enabled Paul to have such an effective ministry?

APPLY

12. What impure motives for ministry can you sense in your heart? Pride? Greed? Recognition? Seeing people as a project rather than someone to love?
13. What can we learn from Paul's ministry and apply to ours?

What Are the Answers?

1. Encourage your group to explore the passage and discern its main point. Paul is defending his ministry against false accusations, pointing out his love, conduct and motives for ministry.
2. That he was a religious charlatan seeking financial profit from them, he was seeking to please men, he didn't have the authority to preach, etc. He cites his love, conduct among them and pure motives.
3. See "What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?"
4. Perhaps as short as three weeks (same basic time frame as project!). He would've likely still been hurting from his beating in Philippi.
5. Motherly love of tenderness, nurture, caring for immediate needs; fatherly love of exhortation, encouragement, caring for future growth.
6. Vulnerability, they opened themselves fully to the Thessalonians, even in the short time they were there.
7. The hope and joy of knowing you've had a part in their presence in Heaven; people are eternal, when we invest in their eternity we store up treasures in Heaven.
8. Share examples from your project.
9. Allow the group to discuss. God uses trials to sanctify us (James 1:2-4, Heb 12:4-13).
10. Paul's ministry was always about Christ, not himself; aspects of Jesus' ministry (love, conduct, motives) are reflected in Paul's.
11. The purpose of this question is to point to how abiding in Christ (Jn 15:1-11) is how Paul lived (Phil 1:21); this is why his ministry was so effective – Jesus was working through him.
12. Allow the group to discuss.
13. Identify specific applications to your project situation. Be sure to highlight the necessity of abiding in Christ and the example of sharing your whole life with the students, even in the short time you'll be in-country.

Memorize

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.

I Thessalonians 2:8