

A Model Worker

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 July 2016

Preacher: Mark Chew

- [0 : 0 0] Now, it's probably fair to say that being able to do a job well in today's sort of modern day age requires a multitude of skills, right? People skills, technical skills, being good with numbers, being able to handle conflict, etc., etc., etc.
- But I think it's also probably true that if you thought hard enough, you could probably identify two or three things that were essential to succeeding in that job.
- So, for example, an accountant needs to have a good attention to detail. To make sure the debits and the credits balance and the transactions are booked to the right accounts.
- Or if you're a news reporter, what you need to be able to do well is to communicate in a succinct and accurate fashion what it is that happened.
- To present the facts as objectively as possible and then to hone in on the things that really matter because you only have 30 seconds to say it. And if you knew that these two or three essential things, what they were, then it would help clarify your priorities when you do your job.
- [1 : 0 4] It brings focus to your job and it helps you to succeed. And that's exactly, I think, what we find with Paul and Silas tonight. Both of them knew what it took to do God's job or God's work well.
- And tonight, Paul reveals what that is in this passage. And by doing so, he gives us a model for successful ministry. Now, in case you're wondering, all Christians are called to be workers, God's workers.
- When we're converted, Paul says in chapter 1 and verse 9 from last week, that we turn from idols to serve the living and true God. We were saved to serve Him.
- Which is why also Paul is prompted to open his letter by thanking God in verse 3. What he says he thanks God for is their work produced by faith.
- Can you see that? And for their labor prompted by love. The Thessalonians, like Paul, believed and then started to do God's work. And now in chapter 2, we find an explanation of this work.
- [2 : 0 8] Now, in one sense, because Paul and Silas are apostles, what we find here is most relevant to Christian leaders. Those who lead, teach and preach. But I think everyone should still listen in.
- Because no matter what stage you're at, there's still a lesson for each of us today. Now, what prompts Paul to write this section is the need to defend his style of ministry.
- You see, there was a view floating around. We're not sure whether it was in Thessalonica or elsewhere, that their visit to that city had been a waste of time. They had encountered difficulty there.
- And according to the account in Acts chapter 17 of that visit, although they had converted some people, what it did as well was to arouse the jealousy of many Jews.
- So much so that Paul and Silas were forced out of that city. They actually had to leave under the cover of darkness. And what happened then was that they had to leave behind a fledgling church before it was firmly established.

[3 : 13] So was their visit a failure then? Well, Paul disagrees because he says in verse 1 of chapter 2 that our visit to you was not without results. It was not in vain.

It was not a failure. On the contrary, Paul and Silas had been intentional in their ministry. They had done what was required of them as God's workers. Now, what exactly did they do?

Well, I think there are three principles that we see in this passage. They're in your outline. So first, we learned that what they did was preach the gospel truthfully without tricks.

Now, having faced opposition to the gospel in Philippi, which was where they just came from, it would have been tempting not to keep preaching the gospel. Or at the very least, to change the message just a little to make it more acceptable to their hearers.

But Paul says in verse 2 that with God's help, they dared to keep telling the gospel. We dared to tell you his gospel. They spoke the whole gospel and nothing but the gospel.

[4 : 14] There was no dilution, no distortion, no sugar coating. For Paul says in verse 3 that the appeal to them, for them to believe, did not spring from error or impure motives.

Nor are we trying to trick you. Later on, two verses on in verse 5, Paul adds that, You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed.

You see, they refused to compromise on the truth. They didn't resolve from calling for repentance in their preaching, of asking people to turn away from their idols to serve God.

They kept insisting that Jesus was the only way to salvation, even though they knew that the only way people would accept that kind of message was if they humbled themselves and admitted their wrongdoing.

But at the end of the day, Paul and Silas knew that even though they were trying to win new converts, their main aim was not to please man, but to please God.

[5 : 17] And this is the second thing that's marked out for us for what they did. They aimed to please God because it was God's work they were doing, and it was God's gospel they were preaching. Paul says in verse 4 that they speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.

And the word to be entrusted with something means to preserve something carefully so that you can pass it on intact without damage.

Like when you're entrusted with a gift or a letter, a very important gift, which you then need to deliver to someone else. You take great care not to destroy or to change it. So Paul and Silas knew that at the end of the day, they had to look to God as the judge of their work.

It's his approval and praise that they sought, not anyone else's. And unlike men, God doesn't just judge their actions, but their hearts as well.

Which is quite a scary thought, isn't it? Because there's really nowhere to hide. Even when we're able to hide our motives from others, God knows. He knows if we're secretly craving the approval of others, or if we do things only to earn the praise of other people.

[6 : 32] But trying to please God alone doesn't mean we don't care how we treat people. Because the third thing that we see in Paul's ministry is that while they aim to please God, and therefore they did not preach anything but the gospel, it also determined the way they treated people.

And how I summarize this in the third point is this, that they place no burden on believers except what is from God. Let me explain what I mean.

Now, this next section that we're going to look at from verses 6 onward is rather lengthy, but I'm actually going to read it in full, so look at it with me. And as I do, I want to see if you can pick up three images, or three household members if you like, which Paul uses to illustrate their manner of ministry.

So verse 6, Paul says, We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority.

Instead, we were like young children among you. Just 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.

[7 : 49] Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship. We worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous, and blameless we were among you who believed.

For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

Now, did you pick them all? Yeah? People just want to shout them out, what the three are. First one? Kids. Did someone say kids? Yeah.

Young children or infants. Number two? Yep. Nursing mother. And the third one? Father. Alright. Now, at first, when you look at all three, it's hard to see how they fit together, right?

How is Paul and Silas, infants, nursing mother, and father, all at the same time, and all while they're actually apostles of Christ? Well, here's the key to understanding them.

[8 : 54] It's actually by realizing that what Paul is doing is picking out one aspect of each of those relationships to illustrate their way of ministry. So, by infants, Paul says that even though they're apostles, they've chosen not to impose their authority on them.

They have a right to command these things as apostles, and in particular, what he has in mind is to insist on material support, but instead, they chose to be an infant. That is, a picture of someone without any authority, without any ability to lord it over them.

Instead of insisting on being served, they became servants. And this then is expanded, I think, with the images of the nursing mother and father.

Both of them are pictures of how to care and love children, or their children. Now, if you speak to Esther Young, or Krista these days, they'll tell you exactly what it's like to be a nursing mother.

Now, for me, it's the very picture of self-giving. You see, breastfeeding is actually unique, different to, you know, bottle feeding or spoon feeding. I hope I'm not speaking out of turn, because I've never actually done it.

[10 : 09] But when a mother breastfeeds, she actually gives from her very own resources, doesn't she? The milk comes from their own bodies. She makes it herself.

And even as the baby is filled and nourished, the mother is drained in that very act. There's a beautiful image, isn't there, of sacrificial love. And no wonder, I think, such a deep bond develops between mother and child through breastfeeding.

Well, I think this image is exactly what Paul is trying to convey. For preaching the gospel cannot be done in a cold and detached way. The gospel itself is life-giving.

It's a message of God loving us so much that he gave us his beloved son to die for us. And so as messengers, Paul is motivated by that same love for his hearers.

His hearers are like helpless babes who need this life-giving message of God's love. In fact, Paul says that such is their love that Paul and Silas not only gave them the gospel, but their lives as well.

[11 : 13] Now, many people, I think, when they hear this, they think that Paul is referring to the fact that they're not just preaching, but doing life together with the Thessalonians, giving life, giving their lives, spending time bonding, doing one-to-one discipleship, that kind of stuff.

But those are certainly good things, right? Don't get me wrong. Gospel preaching is not just about what I do up front. It's about what we do together in small groups and one-to-one.

But I think if we read verse 9, Paul actually clarifies what this giving our lives mean. I think he's referring to their giving of their livelihood. In other words, by not imposing their rights as apostles, the right to be given food and drink, Paul and Silas had to work night and day in order to feed themselves.

They did this, in that sense, gave their life to it. They did this so that the Thessalonians didn't need to give anything in return for the gospel. In that way, no one could then doubt the purity of Paul's motives and say they were preaching for money because they weren't.

The gospel was being made available free of charge with no strings attached. Now, I don't think that when we read this, then it means that we don't need to pay our pastors and gospel workers, right?

[12 : 32] I think that would be the wrong application because Paul says in 1 Timothy 5 that those who preach and teach are worthy of a wage and double even. Rather, I think the application is this, that Paul's point is that in exercising their ministry, Paul chose not to put no further burden on them other than what was expected of them from God, expected of the Thessalonians, that is.

It's not that Paul made no demands on them, but it's simply that they did not want to add to God's demands, that is the demands of the gospel, other things like Paul's and Silas' own rights as apostles.

Now, I say this because even though Paul uses the nursing mother image, he balances that out with that of the image of the father. And being a good father requires that we place demands on our children.

The right ones, that is. So if you ask my own daughters, they would tell you what mine are. Actually, on second thoughts, don't ask them. That might be risky. So let me just tell you what they are instead.

Like in our house, my girls are expected to pull their weight. I make demands like that. They have to pack their own lunch for school. They have to hang out the clothes sometimes. They have to pack away the laundry.

[13 : 54] Now, it's not because I don't ask them to do all this because I want them to serve me. Rather, I demand these things because I want them to grow in maturity. I want to train them into how it is to be a grown-up.

So it's for their benefit that I'm asking them to do these things. Well, I think this is the same approach with Paul and Silas. Even as they feed the word to the believers, they are placing the demands of that word too.

Like a father, he says in verse 12, he encourages or they encourage comfort and urge the believers to live lives worthy of God who calls them into his kingdom and glory.

You see, there's actually a burden that rightly comes from being in God's kingdom. God's glory is weighty and we need to live lives worthy of it. We don't earn our way into the kingdom, but once we are called, it actually makes demands on our lives.

But Paul is so concerned that they live up to these demands that he refuses to place any more requirements on top of that so as not to overburden the Thessalonians.

[15 : 01] It's so different, isn't it, to that first reading that we had in the Old Testament, those shepherds in Ezekiel. There, in chapter 34, God was actually angry at the priests of Israel because they were meant to feed God's people, but instead, what they did was looked after themselves.

They placed their own demands on the people. They took the Kurds, they took the wool and all that kind of stuff, but then they neglected to put God's requirements on them. So listen again to God's judgment against them in verse 2.

I've got it on the screen, I think. Woe to you, shepherds of Israel, who only take care of yourselves. Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the Kurds, clothe yourselves with the wool, slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock.

You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So woeful were they that God had to interview himself in verse 15.

He says, I myself will tend on sheep and have them lie down, declares the sovereign. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. Now, of course, we know that all this is fulfilled in the gospel itself because God sent his son Jesus as the good shepherd who laid down his life for his people.

[16 : 13] And Paul and Silas, I think, are simply following in Jesus' footsteps as they are doing God's work. It's important to get this distinction right, isn't it?

Because it's wrong to think that our leaders don't have a right to place demands on us. They do. But what kind of burden, what kind of demand is the thing that matters?

So when leaders and pastors urge their people to live godly lives, that is the right kind of burden. It's right for us to encourage you to obey God's commands, to be gracious, to be forgiving.

That's what God wants, to be generous, to stop sinning, to commit to obeying God. All these are right burdens to be placing. Now, I don't know where Devin's here.

Now, if you ask Devin, he'll tell you that as a student minister, Andrew Price places a number of demands on him, all as part of his training in godliness. So one of these is to attend the midweek service on Wednesday.

[17 : 14] It's where some of our older folk attend, right? Just this Wednesday, there were actually ten walkers, all passed along the side there. It's that kind of service.

Now, most weeks, Devin doesn't lead or he doesn't do anything up front. And as far as I know, he's not actually training to be a pastor to seniors. I think that's right. And so in some ways, there's no need actually for him to be there.

And yet, Devin has gladly accepted this burden, as it were, because it trains him in godliness to serve as, you know, as he makes cups of teas for the older folk and talks with them after the service.

But at the same time, there are wrong burdens that we could place on Devin, ones that would stem from my own sinful pride. So just to give you an example, it would be wrong, for example, to insist that just because I'm a pastor, that Devin has to then invite me to his birthday party.

That's if he were to have one, of course. It's great, hint hint, if he wants to invite me, and I'll, you know, do it willingly, I'll come if I can, but that is not a burden that I should place on him, right?

[18 : 21] Because that's like apostles demanding their rights. It's a demand that's over and above what God demands. Well, let me summarize the three things that Paul and Silas' ministry is marked by.

One, the preaching of God's word truthfully. Two, the desire to please God and not man. And then three, the aim to place no burden on believers except that which is from God. Now, what does this way of working produce?

Well, in that final section in verses 13 to 16, Paul tells us. For here, he thanks God for the fruit of their ministry. Let's have a look and see what he thanks God for.

Well, when Paul and Silas did what they did, verse 13, this is what happens. The believers in Thessalonica received the word of God and here it is, not as a human word, but as it actually is the word of God.

Can you see what's happened? When God's word is preached truthfully and people are encouraged to obey it, and when we then don't place any burdens except what is from his word, people get the chance to see that what we're saying isn't simply human words, but words from God.

[19 : 41] It's as though God's pure word comes through loud and clear. It's not diluted or distorted, people undistracted by what is merely human wisdom or a pastor's vain requirement to be pleased.

No, God is able to work powerfully through that word. It's like a laser beam. You know, what is it that makes that beam able to cut through things like even metal?

Because unlike normal light, all the light in a beam, all the light waves are actually focused onto a single frequency. So similarly, when we teach, when what we teach is focused solely on God's pure word, then God's word cuts to the heart.

Hearers will recognize it as God's word and not human words. And they know exactly what God requires of them. We will still speak from our feeble lips, but it carries the weight of God's word.

And when that happens, Paul says, in verse 13, at the end of it, God's word is then able to work in those who believe. Can you see that?

[20 : 53] And for the church in Thessalonica, what it did was to allow them to stand firm during persecution. Now, there's more that I could say about that, but I'm not going to because that will be the topic of next week's talk, the topic of persecution.

Instead, let me just conclude by seeing how we might apply this. Well, if you're a leader or a teacher of God's word, here, maybe you're just a, even just a youth leader or a student minister, then this passage applies to you directly.

Our goal isn't to be an impressive teacher, to big note ourselves. Rather, our focus is to present God's word truthfully, to always attempt to let God's work speak for itself, and then for people to experience the weight of that word.

Place on those we lead God's demands from his word and not our own. But even if you're not a leader or teacher, then I think these things are still good things to bear in mind.

For instance, when you share the gospel with others or when you encourage each other, these principles apply too as well. Use God's word and let the weight of God's word dwell or sit with people.

[22 : 10] Pray for us, those who do that week in, week out, that we will serve you in this way, that we will be both a nursing mother and a father. And in fact, you could pray that our lead pastor, he will be someone like that.

Because ultimately, all of us are actually called to do the same thing, that whether we teach or are being taught, our aim is to please God, not men. All of us are called to live lives worthy of God.

And so what we need to do is speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. It's God's word that is the powerful and precious thing here.

And we need to treat it with the glory that it deserves, with the weight that it deserves. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word.

We thank you that even though you've used human authors down the ages and you use human teachers even now, that it does not lose its power, that it comes true with its weight when we speak it truthfully and faithfully.

[23 : 24] So help us to be humble, whether we teach or whether we learn, to seek this milk, seek this food, this word of God that will begin to work in us when we receive it as God's word and when we believe.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.