

Six Lessons on Shepherding: A Pastoral Meditation on 1 Thessalonians 2

March 29, 2017

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In the Bible, leadership is likened to shepherding. In the Old Testament, God shepherded his people; he called shepherds like Moses and David to lead his people; and kings were often likened to shepherds. In the New Testament, the image continues. Elders are commanded to shepherd the people whom God gives them to oversee (1 Peter 5:1–4). And local churches are to recognize a plurality of Spirit-formed shepherds who will lead them and feed them with God's word.

Additionally, the New Testament gives many examples of shepherding, and one of the best is Paul's statement on his ministry in 1 Thessalonians 2. What follows are six lessons to be learned from his ministry and the way elders can shepherd well the people of God today. Take time to read Paul's words in verses 1–16 and consider how Paul's personal ministry demonstrates absolute commitment to preaching the undiluted word and constant attention to the people to whom he preaches.

May we who shepherd learn to do the same.

Six Lessons on Shepherding

1. True shepherds are proactive and forward-leaning.

In verse 1 Paul says, "For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain." Paul's relationship with the Thessalonians came in his second missionary journey, when after being beaten and arrested in Philippi (Acts 16), he traveled to Thessalonica. There too, he experienced opposition, but his labors were not in vain. Because of the gospel, many came to faith. Amidst the opposition, the faith, love, and hope of the Thessalonians became exemplary (see 1 Thessalonians 1).

Still, the point to be made in the actions of Paul and his companions is this: they did not wait for an invitation to come to Thessalonica. Their ministry was proactive and forward-leaning. So too must ours be. Shepherds do not stand on their heels but on our toes—ready to engage, ready to pursue, always alert to danger and the needs of the sheep.

2. True shepherds do not allow emotional distance to result from relational pain.

In ministry it is impossible not to be hurt, and those who turn rejection into a reason for withdrawal probably shouldn't pursue ministry (at least in present). For Paul, [physical pain and emotional rejection were part of the program](#) (see 2 Corinthians 6:4–10; 11:23–28). In fact, he teaches us pain and rejection were the means by which the gospel would advance (see 2

Corinthians 4:11–12; Colossians 1:24–29). Therefore, in 1 Thessalonians 2:2 he says, “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.”

Paul’s commitment to the gospel meant that personal attacks and relational pain were not defeaters to his ministry. Rather, because he understood the power of God in the gospel to save sinners, he continued to proclaim that message. Unlike Jonah whose message came with aloofness, Paul’s ministry of the Word came with relational warmth and ongoing vulnerability. In short, suffering did not harden him, it helped him minister to others. May suffering, by God’s grace, have the same effect on us.

3. True shepherds find pastoral confidence by holding steadfast to the gospel in the face of opposition.

The only way pastors can minister in the face of external opposition and heart-wrenching pain (caused by ministry) is if our hearts’ grip on truth is greater than our trials. In 1 Thessalonians 2:3–4 Paul explains why he can keep going in ministry,

For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, 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.

Objectively, Paul knows the veracity and vitality of the gospel. He knows the commission he has received sends him into danger and that opposition is the always-expected foe on the road of obedience. Therefore, when personal attacks come, he is not deterred. He has been entrusted with the good news, and his mission—like those who follow him—is to deliver the message whatever the cost.

Subjectively, Paul is confident his labors are not motivated by error, impurity, or deceit. Before the Lord, he knows his designs are for the eternal good of others. How does he know? He knows because of his willingness to suffer for the sake of Jesus’ church. Simultaneously, his willingness to endure financial hardship proves the sincerity of his labors. He can say resolutely, “we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts,” because suffering has purified his ministry and his motives.

May we have such confidence in our shepherding. But dear brother, know that such Spirit-empowered, self-confidence can only come as we minister through trials. Only as we suffer in the work will we know what kind of heart we have. In this way, suffering is not only needed for the work, it is also needed for the worker.

4. True shepherds must reject the temptation of man-pleasing and self-exaltation.

Paul has already said in verses 3–4 that they have not labored to please man. Now in verses 5–6 he repeats himself,

For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.

Paul denies three temptations in these two verses. First, he says that they refused to use flattery as a means of gaining the Thessalonians favor. Next, they refused to seek financial

benefit from the Thessalonians. And third, they refused to use their status as apostles to seek personal glory.

In practice, this meant that Paul did not use elegant words to charm the Thessalonians, a practice among ancient orators. Instead, he reasoned in the synagogue and trusted in the power of the preached Word. Moreover, he worked with his hands in order to provide for himself and provide a model for the Thessalonians (2:9; 2 Thess 3:7–9). And last he took position of a spiritual mother and father who sacrificed himself in order to see his children flourish in the Lord.

For Paul ministry was never about leading others to praise him. His joy was always found in seeing others grow in the Lord. He says this explicitly in 2:19–20 and it should be our aim as well. It is nice when members of the church recognize our labors and praise our efforts, but this cannot be our motivation. Its absence should not stifle our work. Rather, rejecting the temptations of self-exaltation, we should find joy in serving like Christ, with Christ, and for Christ.

5. True shepherds must be gentle mothers, co-laboring brothers, and wise fathers.

From verse 7–12 Paul employs three family images to describe his labors among the Thessalonians. Together Paul's appeal to motherhood, brotherhood, and fatherhood teach us that the church is a family. We should think and act like we are in God's household. As Joseph Hellerman has argued in his book [When the Church was a Family](#), we should see ourselves not as isolated individuals who put God first. Rather, in Christ our whole identity is shaped by the household of God. Accordingly, elders are the older brothers in the family who must feed, lead, and instruct the rest of the church. Accordingly, Paul uses three images.

First, Paul describes their ministry in Thessalonica as "gentle," like that of a "nursing mother taking care of her own children." The import of this verse is to say that Paul and his companions were not harsh, but neither were they absent. A nursing mother is constantly attending to her children. So it is for shepherds, we must not assume sheep will feed themselves (or eat the right diet). We must with all our gentle strength ensure that the flock is eating. Their nourishment is our concern, and like a nursing mother we must be with them in order to feed them.

Second, Paul reminds his "brothers" how they labored together (vv. 8–9). Paul is speaking, I believe, about their physical labors, but the point goes beyond shared vocations. God's shepherds must rub shoulders with the people they lead. We must not always be face-to-face, we must also be side-by-side. The goal of discipleship is not simply to convey information. Disciples are called to follow Jesus into the fields—evangelizing, helping, interceding, serving, speaking, etc. Elders are the appointed leaders in the church; where we walk so should the church. But we are most effective when we walk alongside them to encourage them and model for them along the way. Failure to walk side-by-side makes it far more difficult to teach face-to-face.

Finally, Paul likens himself to a father with his children (v. 11). Like a faithful father exhorts and encourages his children, so Paul called the Thessalonians to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel of God. He reminds them that it was God who called them into his own kingdom and glory. Paul's role was simply to help them to get their. And the primary way he helped them walk worthy was through teaching and encouragement. Let's not miss this: true shepherds do more than instruct, we inspire, motivate, encourage, and uplift. Through prayer, application of Scripture, and just being with our people we help them walk with the Lord.

6. True shepherds spend time with their sheep.

One overarching point that stands out in all that Paul says about his ministry is the time he took with his sheep. Like a nursing mother, a loving brother, and faithful father, he did not simply share the gospel of God with them, he also endeavored to share his life. Such a time-commitment is indicative of the church's family nature. Sure, we conduct business, have projects, and do ministry, but always these tasks are done as a family. Thus, we must not treat church like a business. We are a family and we must spend time together.

Accordingly, only as we spend time together do the truths of the gospel get applied into all areas of life. Only as we take prayer, Scripture, and Christian thinking outside of the formal settings of church gathering do we help disciples learn to apply Scripture to all of life. In truth, this is one of the most difficult aspects of ministry in a mobile culture, but it is also one that is most vital to see Christ formed in the lives of God's people.

We cannot expect to see disciples rightly apply the Word of God if they haven't seen good models. Therefore, like nursing mothers, loving brothers, and wise fathers we must get close the people God has called us to shepherd. For in no other way will we see faith formed in the face of opposition.

The Under-Shepherds' Joy Depends on His Obedience (Empowered and Confirmed by God's Grace)

Paul closes his section praising God for the grace he gave to confirm the work of his hands (1 Thessalonians 2:13–16). He rejoices that his weak labors have resulted in a church standing firm in Christ in the face of hostile opposition.

In this praise, Paul reminds us that any good thing that is accomplished in church is the Lord's doing. But part of the Lord's doing is raising up shepherds who tend the flock of God well. Paul gives us at least six lessons about shepherding in 1 Thessalonians 2. May we consider his words and imitate his faith and practice, that we too might rejoice in the fruit born through our pastoral ministry. May our joy increase as we obediently fulfill the ministries he has given to us.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds