

“Caring for the Church” 1 Thessalonians 2 Ricky Jones 5/2/21

The words I want to preach from this afternoon come from 1 Thessalonians 2. While you're turning there, I'll tell you a story. When I was first moved here to Tulsa to plant a church, I didn't know if it was going to work. Oh, by the way, children are dismissed. I don't know what age, take off. Y'all know, I don't. Just do the right thing, that's the key. When I was first here, we had a prayer meeting at 6:30 in the morning at Bill Stitt's office; I remember that. I don't do mornings. That's not me at all. Like, that's as far from me as possible, and I remember... it may have started at 6. It started early. I think it started at 6:30 and that's about a twenty-minute drive from my house, and I remember very clearly about the fourth time we did it, my alarm clock went off and I was so tired and I said, "I just can't go. I'm not going." And my wife pushed me, she said, "You've got to go." And I said, "I can't go. I'm not going." And she said, "Ricky, it's your baby. You've got to get up." And in saying that, she really seized on something, didn't she? She seized on something that you parents know. You can sleep through alarm clocks, but when you have that baby for the first time, you realize, they don't come with snooze buttons, and if they're crying at one in the morning or three in the morning or five in the morning, they don't ask how late you stayed up last night, the only thing they know is they need to be fed and the only thing you know is it's your baby. You've got to get up. She was right! She was really seizing upon the truth that's in this text from 1 Thessalonians in chapter 2 where the apostle Paul is describing the best church he planted. He planted some really terrible churches. You wouldn't want to have been in the church in Corinth, it was a nightmare! He planted some pretty good ones, you know, Philippians was sweet, but Thessalonians, he didn't have a single bad thing to say about it! And he says, you are my baby. You are my baby. Please stand as we read 1 Thessalonians 2 beginning with verse 5.

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.

¹³ And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. ¹⁴ For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind ¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the

Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!”

Thus far, the reading of God’s word. All men are like grass, and all of our glory is like the flowers of the field, and the grass withers and the flowers fall, but not God’s word. God’s word stands forever. You may be seated.

Paul exhorts us, Shane, I would even go so far as to say he exhorts you, to love your church like a mother and a father, and the prayer is that you will see them respond as one of your children. These are precious words. They really are. And we don’t get to preach this sermon much, but I finally got to! I’ve been wanting to for a long time and it’s so, they’re so precious. N.T. Wright says these words should be carved in stone over every pastor’s desk or better, engraved in gold upon every pastor’s heart. Love your church like a nursing mother loves her baby, like a father loves his children, and they will grow! Let’s just talk. Let’s just play with this a little bit. Shane, have you ever thought of yourself as a nursing mother? It’s odd. Let’s just go there. It’s odd. It’s awkward. But there’s something actually very precise, actually, there’s a lot of things precise about it, and it’s really clear why Paul chose that image.

First of all, a mother nurses hoping for nothing in return. I mean, I know the art, it’s all pretty with the sweet mom holding her baby, baby looking lovingly up at mom. That is not how it works! It’s tired mom at three in the morning and it is a baby looking back at her like she was a lamppost. No recognition. The baby is not paying for the milk. The baby is not saying thank you for the milk. The baby is not even looking at you affectionately for the milk. Mom does it purely and solely out of sacrifice, hoping for nothing in return, and that’s what Paul says! We could have made demands, but we didn’t come to you out of greed, we didn’t come to you even seeking glory! We came to you hoping for nothing, just to give! Just to give. Not hoping for status. Not hoping for power. Not hoping for the satisfaction of feeling good about yourself! Just to give. That pure generosity of giving of yourself. That’s the beautiful picture of the gospel and it’s the one that we have to keep in mind. Jesus came for us, not hoping for anything! He came and he loved us like loving a pet, without any hope of gaining anything in response, just out of sheer grace and sacrifice, and there’s just beauty in that, and there’s danger outside of that. I mean, I think if you really look at the shipwrecks of the ministry all over our country, you see it, you see it almost immediately when people start doing ministry out of how it makes them feel. And it does feel good. The pay is pretty good, we’re Presbyterians for heaven’s sake. So, we get paid pretty well. But we really didn’t do it for the money. But it does feel good. Lying about that isn’t helpful. But when you start doing ministry so that the people in your church make you feel good, it turns into this dirty manipulation and they start telling you things about how great you are and you start turning your sermons around to making them feel good about how great they are, and it turns into this kind of self-congratulatory cancer. That’s not you. The apostle Paul says, I didn’t come seeking glory, and I didn’t come seeking money, I came to nurse you like a mother. Not hoping for anything.

And then, in the midst of that picture of the nursing mother, we have this incredible, beautiful picture of gentleness. What does he say? “We were gentle among you.” I wonder how many pastoral search committees, when they’re putting together their job description, put that at the top. Gentle. Gracious. Somebody who can handle my heart when my heart is being wrecked.

Gentle among you. I think the word gentle is fascinating. It's not weak. Somebody who is weak is unable to be gentle. If you watch a child try to carry glass bottles, they don't do real well. They're not strong enough to be gentle, so they end up breaking them. There's a strength to gentleness. There's a knowledge to gentleness, you know how much this container can stand. There's a warmth. To me, the definition of gentleness is being able to walk into a room when everyone is at the brink of tears, and you're able to say, 'It's okay, I'm here.' And for some reason, they believe you. I had a doctor when I was in Cleveland, MI, he practiced, he actively practiced medicine until he was 85, sorry Marsha, I'm not trying to set up a standard there, but he actively practiced until he was 85. He was a general practitioner and he just had the most gentle hands. You could put anything in those hands, a broken arm, a broken foot, the most painful, the sorest of things, the thing that you are absolutely terrified of someone touching, you would set it in his hands, and he would touch you with such knowledge and warmth and it was as if those hands were magic. They made you feel better. Just the second he touched you, you knew he knew what was wrong and what to do. Gentle. Like a nursing mother taking care of her children.

Gentle. Not expecting anything in return, and the last thing he says here about a nursing mother that gets me is, 'We're anxious to share with you not only the gospel, but ourselves.' We're anxious to share with you ourselves. Here we are. We left it on the field. The old football saying, they left it on the field. There was nothing left. There wasn't just, kind of, here, throwing you out this information, now I've got to go do something else. I'm giving you, me! With each sharing of the gospel, with each explanation of Christ's sacrifice, I'm not just telling you something that's a piece of information that I heard over there and I want to share over here, I'm giving you myself! Here I am! You're preaching what God has done inside of your heart. Our preaching is not something that we've learned that day, it's something that we've lived that year. It is what God is doing in us. And that's what they remembered. That's what they took away. It was not just the words; it was the example.

Look ahead here in verse 10: "You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, ¹² we exhorted each one of you." Now, he shifts, it's beautiful, with no apology, he shifts from mother to father, right? He says, like a father, you know what we were like! Oh, for more preachers who are willing to say that, you know? We have a way of ducking that one, don't we? We say, 'Only follow me as much as I follow Jesus! Don't look to me, look to Christ!' No, Paul doesn't pull that. Over and over again, if you actually read the New Testament, he says this in every letter, 'You remember what I was like!' Yeah. We have to say it, right? You know that! You know that! It's in your baptism vows! When you baptize your child, you say, what do you ask the parents? You say, are you going to live out before this child a Godly example? And we're going to ask you right here in a few minutes when you take these vows, will you live out a Godly example? Will you be willing to say to everyone in this room, 'Yeah, watch me. If you don't understand what I'm saying, watch.' That's what being a father is all about!

I've got an old swimming pool with a vinyl liner that gets holes in it, you know that, and it never gets holes in July when it's 100 degrees and I want to get in the pool anyway. It gets holes in it, it starts leaking, in January. One January, I was like, oh great, somebody's got to get in there and fix the hole. So, I don't have any wet suits, so I put on my jogging pants, I put on a

long sleeve sweatshirt, t-shirt, and I'm like, here we go, and I jump in. I start inching my way along the wall to fix the hole in the wall, and Will, he was four years old at the time, I know that because he wasn't in school yet, and he looks at mom and he goes, "What Daddy's doing is like rule number five of being a man or something!" And he's kind of right! If it needs doing, you do it. And what was he saying? I never really sat down with Will and explained, "These are the rules of being a man. Rule #5 jump in the swimming pool." But he was saying, the example is what I remember! It's the example that I remember.

And the apostle Paul is saying, look, I know you don't remember all the words I told you, but you remember what I was like! You remember me. I was there and I was showing you what Godliness looked like as I was exhorting you, that's the word we get coaching from actually, repeating myself over and over, telling you what it looks like to walk in a manner worthy of God, to live your life, not just giving information, but to live, to practice, to do it over and over again so that when you're in the situation, when you're in a position where temptation is facing you or where you have the opportunity to sin, or where you're not sure what to do, you do the right thing! You make a Godly decision because it's how you've practiced, and I was there exhorting you and encouraging you and charging you over and over. And so, how did they listen? Therefore, since we were there being gentle with you, giving ourselves to you, living our lives out before you, living this example of Godliness out before you, you receive the word of God from us, not as the words of a person, not as the words of a stranger, but they really are the words of God!

That's a fascinating thing. It's what's supposed to happen, but it seldom does. It's what's supposed to happen. You know, one of the things that I love about the Presbyterian church is we have a very high view of preaching. What's going on right now, when through the authority of the elders, someone who has been ordained, someone who we do all these silly steps to, and I know they look silly at times, all the laying on of hands and the pronouncements and the blabby-blabbities. Look, I grew up in the country in Dresden, TN, it's as weird to me as it is to you, but it's important! It's important because we believe that when an ordained person is standing behind this pulpit proclaiming God's word, it's not just the reading of God's word, it's the proclamation of the word that truly is the word of God! And you want it to be received as the word of God, but it's not. Why not?

Because I don't know you. Especially when you first hear it, it's just weird, and you're like, 'This guy just wants to walk in, he doesn't know me, and he's going to tell me how to spend my money, and he's going to tell me what to do with my sexuality, and he's going to tell me how to raise my children, who is this guy?' And you come and you live with them. We were *with* you. It's this incarnational principle that Jesus didn't just send his word, God didn't just send His word out, God came and lived with us, and He sent His apostles out to the cities to live with them and the apostles laid hands on the church and the church has laid hands upon you to come live with the people of Ethos, so they can watch you, so they can feel your love, so they can feel this gentle ministry and they can look at you, and go, well what he's saying is dangerous, if he's just trying to tell us what to do so he can have power over us, that would be very dangerous! But, he's not doing it for himself. He's not doing it for fame. He's not doing it to gain power. He's not doing it for money. He's just giving himself. And they begin to trust you, and they see how your life is being transformed, and they become imitators, and then, and only then, are they ready

to receive God's word from you as the word of God. They see your humility, that you are someone who knows that he's been forgiven, and therefore, you are someone who is in the process daily of forgiving, and your way of life shows that you actually believe that this is the word of God. So that they're able to receive your words, not because you're eloquent, not because you're a good arguer, not because you're intelligent, not because you're persuasive, but because you believe it! And because the Holy Spirit is coming out of that and they accept it as God's word.

There's an old, I never, ever end a sermon with a poem, ever. This might be the first time, ever. I just want y'all to know. This is a one-off. But if N.T. Wright can quote it, I can steal it, right? He said, "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day. I would rather one walk with me, than merely show me the way. The eye is a better student, more willing than the ear, fine counsel is confusing, but an example is always clear." This church will become imitators of you before it becomes molded by you. Don't be worried. God's at work in you and He's going to complete the work He started. He's at work to will and to work in you according to His good pleasure. And in order for this to not overwhelm you, you've got to trust Him. The exact same way you had to when your firstborn son was put in your hands, and you were terrified, do you remember how terrified you were? Deep in your heart, you had to believe, that not only did God give me this child because He loves me, but God gave this child me, because He loves him. You have to believe that, and you have to believe that God gave Ethos, you. The God that loves Ethos so much that He gave His own Son for it, gave them you because He loves them. Please pray with me.