

LESSONS IN BASIC CHRISTIANITY:

(3) CHRISTIAN SERVICE

1 Thessalonians 2:1-3:13

Worship Moment Message

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PREFACE

In this third installment of our series on 1 Thessalonians we will look at what Paul says about Christian service. In chapters two and three of his letter he summarizes the ministry that he and his companions rendered to and with the Thessalonian believers. The concerns addressed are so basic that they remain marks of Christian service today. I am not going to read aloud all of chapters two and three but instead will read selected verses within the context of the message.

SCRIPTURE

(The Scripture will be read in the context of the message. 1 Thessalonians 2:1-3:13 NRSV, selected).

INTRODUCTION

Many church people think of the word “service” as just another name for an hour long worship event on Sunday morning. A little girl noticed a plaque of names on the wall at church and asked, “What is that?” Her father, a retired Army veteran said, “Those are the names of those who died in the service.” The girl thought about that for a moment and then inquired, “The 8:30 or the 11:00?”

Service is an important part of being a follower of Jesus Christ. God wants each one of us, each believer, to serve him. Every believer is a minister. Now, not every believer is a pastor, but every believer is a minister. Not every believer is an active minister, some seem to be on leave or even AWOL. But God wants each one of us to be involved in ministry. Ministry simply means using what I have to help somebody else in the name of God. Any time you use your talents, your abilities, your background, your experiences to help somebody else, that is called ministering.

In the Bible the words "service" and "ministry" are translations of the same Greek term. So all of us are called to ministry. All of us are called to service. Some of you may want to say "I'm not called to ministry." But, in fact, you are! If you are called to salvation, you are called to serve. Every Christian is a minister. Any time you use your talents to help somebody else, you are ministering. You are serving. If we are believers, we are called to serve Jesus Christ and, in his name, serve others.

After Paul left Thessalonica, his service to and with the Thessalonians was criticized. So in his letter to them he takes the opportunity to set the record straight. In the process he also highlights five key aspects of legitimate Christian ministry. The first is motive:

1. MOTIVE

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, ² but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. ³ For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, ⁴ but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts (2:1-5).

Paul raises the important question as to what motivates the person involved in service. If their motivation is to serve themselves, to get some personal profit or gain out of it, then it is not legitimate. But if the desire is to please God, then it is legitimate.

For some reason, Paul was accused of doing all this missionary work so that he could become rich. Now if, indeed, he became rich through his missionary efforts, it is one of the best kept secrets of the Bible. A secret which Paul didn't even know about. Paul is very indignant at this accusation that he is doing this so he could become rich. And that's why he goes through great pains, not only in this letter, but in other letters to say, "We not only told you about the Gospel, but we offered our very selves" (2:8).

Many times Paul didn't want to financially burden the people he was with. He knew how to make tent cloth, an important commodity in those days. He often supported himself by making and selling tent cloth. Profit was not his motive for ministry.

Nor should it be ours. Instead it needs to be our desire to please God. God has offered us the greatest gift of all – the gift of his one and only Son Jesus Christ. If we truly appreciated the value of this gift our lives would be filled with gratitude and we would want to serve God. Furthermore, Scripture tells us that everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ also receives a measure of God's grace in order to do just that – serve God and others. We are empowered and led by the Holy Spirit to fulfill our calling as servants of the Lord.

The second key aspect of legitimate Christian ministry is character:

2. CHARACTER

As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed;⁶ nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others,⁷ though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.⁸ So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.⁹ You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.¹⁰ You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers (2:6-10).

Motive has to do with why we do what we do. Character has to do with how often we do what we do. Character is the fruit of choices. If we repeatedly make bad choices we develop a bad character. If we repeatedly make good choices we develop a good character.

God wants each and every believer to develop a Christ-like character. If character is the fruit of our choices then developing a Christ-like character involves choosing to do what Christ would do in each situation. This is what Paul says he and his colleagues did in Thessalonica. They demonstrated good character – they were upright and blameless – because they were living in Christ. They were as concerned about the people they served as a good mother would be for her own children.

But character does not develop over night. It is the accumulation of decisions made over time. And it is not so much the big decisions, as important as they may be. It is the hundreds and hundreds of little decisions that make the real difference. The decision to be thankful for what someone else has done. The decision to be honest when filling out a legal form. The decision to say a kind word rather than a mean one.

Good character is integrally related to Christ-like service. It authenticates the service. It authenticates the server. It increases the likelihood that the service will have a lasting impact.

The third key aspect of legitimate Christian ministry is the Word of God:

3. WORD

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers (2:13).

Paul tells us that he most earnestly wanted to tell the Thessalonian Christians what God wanted Paul to say to them. The Gospel message he gave them was faithful to Scripture and what God had revealed in Jesus Christ.

We believe the Bible is the Word of God. It teaches us about the meaning and practice of faith. The historical term that Protestant Christians have used is *sola Scriptura*. The principle of sola Scriptura has to do with the sufficiency of Scripture as our final authority in all spiritual matters. Sola Scriptura simply means that all truth necessary for our salvation and spiritual life is taught either explicitly or implicitly in Scripture.

To be sure, the Bible is not equally clear in all places. There are parts that are hard to understand. But there are plenty of places that are quite clear and we can spend a lifetime just trying to apply the parts we do understand.

Sola Scriptura is also not a claim that all truth of every kind is found in Scripture. The scope of the Scriptures is salvation. The Bible is not a textbook for calculus or a manual for building railroad bridges. That is not its purpose. But if you want to know the meaning of life and how to live that life, the Scriptures can show the way.

In order for Christian service to be legitimate it must be faithful to the Word of God.

The fourth key aspect of legitimate Christian ministry is prayer:

4. PRAYER

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you (3:9-11).

Many people today view prayer the way you would view a parachute if you were a pilot – you're glad it is available but you hope you never have to use it. But prayer for Paul was not a last ditch effort but a first place priority. He frequently requested prayer from others

(1 Thess 5:25). And if someone like the Apostle Paul needed prayer then how much more do we. Billy Graham once said there are three things needed for an effective ministry: prayer, prayer, and prayer!

Prayer is our privilege. It is with joy and gratitude Paul prays for his friends. And we can do the same. What a delightful privilege we have to bring those we love to the mercy seat of God. When we pray for others we are sharing our connection with God. When we share our connection with God we are participating in God's work of bringing people to himself. So let us pray for others that they may connect with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

The fifth key aspect of legitimate Christian ministry is love:

5. LOVE

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³ And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints (3:12-13).

Love is not only one of the key aspects of legitimate Christian ministry, in many ways it is the sum of all of them. Jesus said that the greatest commandment was to love God and that a second was like it – to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (see Matt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10:25-28).

In Luke's Gospel we read of the account of an expert in religious law who was grilling Jesus, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" But the expert in religious law found himself cross-examined in return, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" The expert in religious law got the answer right: love God with everything you have and love your neighbor as yourself. But then he tried to find a loophole to justify his past omissions of love to others: "And who is my neighbor?"

Religious teachers in Jesus' day taught that the "neighbor" in "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" referred only to people who shared the same values and ethnicity (i.e. a fellow Israelite). Jesus shattered that definition by telling the story we now refer to as the Story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). Neighbor is not limited to people who are like you but includes people who are different from you, who may even dislike you. Jesus took the question, "Who is my neighbor?" and replaced it with, "How can I *be* a neighbor to others?" The lesson here is that love is not to be conditioned by its object.

Ian Pitt-Watson, the late professor of preaching at Fuller Seminary, made this observation about his daughter (adapted from *A Primer for Preachers*):

When Rosemary, my youngest child, was three, she was given a little rag doll, which quickly became an inseparable companion. She had other toys that were intrinsically far more valuable, but none that she loved like she loved the rag doll. Soon the rag doll became more and more rag and less and less doll. It also became more and more dirty. If you tried to clean the rag doll, it became more ragged still. And if you didn't try to clean the rag doll, it became dirtier still. The sensible thing to do was to trash the rag doll. But that was unthinkable for anyone who loved my child. If you loved Rosemary, you loved the rag doll—it was part of the package. "Love me, love my rag dolls," says God, "including the one you see when you look in the mirror."

Love means learning to treat people the way Jesus would treat people. It is loving all of God's "rag dolls" including ourselves. And we are to follow this principle as we engage in service to God by serving others. We are, Paul says, to "abound in love for one another and for all" (3:12).

CONCLUSION

Serving others is a critical part of the Christian faith. It is worth noting that in his letter addressing basic Christianity, Paul spends at least forty *per cent* of it on the topic of service. He underscores that the motive for service needs to be a desire to please God. The character of service needs to be Christ-like. The Word of God needs to be our authoritative guide. Prayer is what undergirds it. And love is both the goal and the means for obtaining it.