

1 Thessalonians 2:1-16: The Work Force

Introduction

A billionaire businessman had a meeting with his new son-in-law. "I love my daughter, and now I welcome you into the family," said the man. "To show you how much we care for you, I'm making you a 50-50 partner in my business. All you have to do is go to the factory every day and learn the operations."

The son-in-law interrupted, "I hate factories. I can't stand the noise."

"I see," replied the father-in-law. "Well then you'll work in the office and take charge of some of the operations."

"I hate office work," said the son-in-law. "I can't stand being stuck behind a desk all day."

"Wait a minute," said the father-in-law. "I just made you half-owner of a highly profitable corporation, but you don't like factories and won't work in an office. What am I going to do with you?"

"Easy," said the young man. "Buy me out!!!"

You can guess why this young man married the billionaire's daughter. This passage is not for those who want to avoid work and who have deplorable motives for what they do. This passage is about what I have called "The Work Force." That may be a bit off-putting to those of us who, especially on Sundays, want to forget all about work. But you'll remember that 1 Thessalonians has a heavy emphasis on the importance of work. It speaks about "the *work* of faith" and about "the *labour* of love". It also speaks about the *endurance* of hope. The word "endurance" is similar to the concept of work and labour. In Chapter 1 Paul teaches us that faith, love and hope all motivate us to expend a great deal of effort in living the Christian life.

In 1 Thessalonians 2 Paul continues to emphasise this concept of work. He mentions this explicitly in verse 9: "*Surely you remember, brothers, 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.*" This is "the labour of love" revisited: "*We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us*" (v8). The language of work is also applied to the operation of the Word of God in verse 13: "*...the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*" It is also implicit in describing the measures adopted by Jewish persecutors: "*...in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles.*" Persecutors expend a lot of effort, they work hard, to prevent the communication of the gospel. This contrasts with the way Chapter 2 begins, that is, with the efforts Paul, Silas and Timothy expended to make sure they communicated the gospel properly. In verse 2 the NIV, along with many translations, speaks of Paul's courage in telling the gospel to the Thessalonians "in spite of strong opposition." However, the phrase Paul uses literally means "a great struggle" and the NEB expresses the sense better here: "*we declared the gospel of God to you frankly and fearlessly, by the help of our God. A hard struggle it was.*" Once again the idea is of hard work, of great effort being expended. So this chapter is about (1) Communicators at Work; (2) Love at Work; (3) The Word at Work; and (4) Persecutors at Work.

Communicators at Work

"...we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel" (v4). Medical students have to do six years of hard, intensive training before they qualify as doctors. My wife sometimes gives me advice about what I should and should not eat for the good of my health. Usually it's plain common sense, but sometimes I'm not convinced her advice is right. However, when my doctor gives me advice I try to act on it. I know my doctor has studied hard for many years to gain expert knowledge now recognized by the Australian

medical authorities. Sometimes his advice is a matter of life and death. At one check-up he told me that I was in pretty good health, but needed to exercise ½ hour each day.

When we are making decisions of major importance we need input from people who are well qualified to tell us what we need to know. A Christian asked me for some legal advice. I replied I was not qualified to give such advice, that she needed to speak to someone competent to give that kind of input. Paul says, "*...we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.*" We also have to be very careful about the advice we give to migrants and refugees. The government has strict rules about this and a person who wants to give such advice needs to be registered with the government, be a person approved by the government to be entrusted with communicating accurate information.

This is the communication age. We are bombarded with input from all directions by a myriad of communicators. A lot of it is trivial but sometimes we can't ignore it. A few years back we needed to buy a car. At one car yard the salesman tried to persuade us to buy a 1998 Holden Ballina wagon, offering me thousands of dollars reduction on the advertised price and telling me not to buy a car from an auction. Why didn't I buy that car? I couldn't trust the motives of that car salesman. I found it hard to see him as a man of integrity. I knew he had a vested financial interest in selling me cars from his yard. Further, he didn't know me from a bar of soap. He had no reason to treat me with special consideration. But those who helped me buy a fixed-price car from Pickles Auctions were people I knew personally and trusted because I knew they were genuinely trying to help me get a good deal and knew a lot about cars. Years later I'm still happy with that car.

I don't know what first century citizens in Thessalonica would have considered as the equivalent of buying a car. For most people back then even buying a horse was not an option. People just walked. But when Paul, Silas and Timothy came to Thessalonica they sought to persuade all who would hear them that they needed to make a decision far more radical and life-changing than any decision you might make about which car you'll buy, or which house you'll buy, or what job you'll take up, or even which man or woman you will marry. Later in the chapter Paul speaks about the way his own compatriots, the Jews, were working hard "*to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved*" (v16). That's the importance of the decision that they had to make and which all people are called upon to make still today. It is a life and death decision. Where you will spend eternity depends on how you assess this communication, this message about Jesus.

First, understand that the gospel message is worthy of your full and complete confidence. We have to be careful here. I am now communicating the gospel but the trustworthiness of the gospel does not depend on my integrity. It depends on the integrity of the original communicators of the gospel: "*we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.*" I trained through Moore College and was awarded a B.Th and a M.Th. I was ordained by the Presbyterian Church. You can say that I have been approved by Moore College and the Presbyterian Church to communicate the Christian message. But I cannot place myself on the same footing as the apostle Paul. In verse 6 Paul says, "*As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you.*" When Paul uses the word "apostles" he is using a very strong term. Sometimes Christians try to water this term down and pretend that it just means "sent ones" and can apply to any missionaries. The Charismatic Church in particular sometimes speaks about modern day apostles. But this is a serious misunderstanding. Paul had unusual authority as an apostle of God. He was approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel in a way that was utterly unique.

I think of three Presbyterian ministers, all known to me personally, who have divorced from their wives in the last few years. All three were once respected as faithful communicators of the gospel. When the marriages of such leaders collapse the fall-out for

God's people and church members is colossal and highly damaging. Some Christians leave the church and some, in their disgust with such leaders, may chuck in the whole idea of living the Christian life. Clearly, the moral behaviour of Christian leaders must be exemplary. However, do not make your own acceptance of the gospel dependent on the conduct of myself or any other modern Christian leader. The gospel message which we have written down in our Bibles today is a thoroughly trustworthy ministry because it was written down by thoroughly trustworthy people, like Paul. In the work place it is the hard workers who are usually the most trustworthy people. If people are slackers at work then they are usually also slack in their morals. If they cannot be relied upon to work well then they cannot be relied upon in other areas of their lives either. Paul was a trustworthy communicator because he expended enormous effort to communicate the gospel to people, struggling hard in the face of immense opposition.

Love at Work

Paul also expended great efforts to ensure that the Thessalonian Christians were motivated to live the Christian life, that is, as Paul puts it in verse 12 *"to lead lives worthy of God."* He wanted them to know beyond doubt that he wasn't in it for the money. So even for the few weeks Paul was in Thessalonica he worked with his hands day and night, presumably making tents and selling them.

Father: Why don't you get yourself a job?

Son: Why?

Father: So you could earn some money.

Son: Why?

Father: So you could put some money in a bank account and earn interest.

Son: Why?

Father: So that when you're old you can use the money in your bank account ...and you would never have to work again.

Son: I'm not working now.

Paul was not interested in sponging off the hospitality of the Thessalonian Christians. Christians must not be spongers. We must learn to work hard. Although Paul worked so hard, he somehow managed to fit in a lot of personal ministry, spending time with the small group of Thessalonian Christians and treating them with the love of a mother and the love of a father.

First, he treated them with the love of a mother: *"but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children"* (v7). Second, he treated them with the love of a father, *"For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to lead lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory"* (v11). It's interesting to get some feel for the way in which Paul distinguished between the role of a mother and the role of a father. A mother's role is to care for her children and treat them with great gentleness. A father's role is to motivate his children, to set before them a high goal and help them to reach it. The words "encouraging", "comforting" and "urging" are all words associated with the concept of strength. The mother should especially be a source of gentleness. The father should be a source of strength. One of the great tragedies of our fallen world is that so often the roles are reversed. We end up with the mother being the true source of strength for the family and the father being an ineffectual, namby-pamby influence. The gospel is trustworthy because it was communicated by people who were men of integrity in their communication and men of love in their relationships.

You may have heard about what happened when Bill Gates was visiting Belgium and was hit in the face with a cream pie. He immediately rang up the Belgium Police Department. The person at the other end, asked: "Country?"

"The USA"

"Native language?"

"English"

"Okay, sir. Your police department ID number is BP31415927. Please use this number the next time you call. Now, you say you were hit in the face with a pie?"

"Yes, I was just about to meet with the Belgian Prime Minister. One person distracted me while another hit me with a cream pie."

"We've had other customers report that they were hit in the face with a custard pie. Are you sure it was a cream pie?"

"Well, I have white stuff all over my face and I don't see any custard, so I really don't think it was a custard pie."

"Have you visited the Prime Minister before?"

"Yes."

"Were you hit in the face with a pie then?"

"No..."

"Hmm... have you visited any other Prime Ministers in the past month?"

"Yes."

"Any pies then?"

"No."

"Okay, well.. let's try something. Go outside the building and come in again. I'll wait."

"Just a minute..." <several minutes pass> "Okay, I'm back."

"Did you get hit by another pie?"

"Of course not."

"Well sir, I don't know what could have caused the first pie, but it looks like things are working fine now. I'll make a note of the problem, though. If it happens again, please note the exact details of the situation and call us again. Thank you for calling the Brussels Police Department. " <click>

I'm sure you can think of heaps of organisations which tell you they exist to serve you, that they welcome your complaints if you are dissatisfied with their service, and who drive you up the wall with their utter indifference to your needs. By contrast, Paul declares, *"We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us"* (v8). The great evangelist and preacher Dwight L. Moody came home one day and his family said to him, "Cancel your next meeting. You look so weary and we know you're tired." He gave this tremendous response, "I am weary in the work, but I am not weary of the work." Pray for your Christian leaders that they will not get weary of the work. I hope you don't think they are from the Belgium Police Department.

The Word at Work

The trustworthiness of the gospel is also indicated by its own inherent power. This was abundantly expressed in the lives of the Thessalonians: *"when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe"* (v13). Not only do we see the apostles working hard to communicate the gospel and to establish new believers in the Christian faith. We also see the Word of God itself at work. The Word of God is not conjury. You can't just quote Bible texts at people and expect that it will somehow magically change them. Communicating the Word of God is not like waving a wand. We need God the Holy Spirit to call people into his kingdom and glory, to cause those he has chosen to believe. When people do believe then God enables us to understand that his Word, the Bible, is not the word of men but the Word of God. It is only the Word of God

that can enable us to imitate other Christians who are prepared to suffer for their faith. If you do not wholeheartedly believe in the Bible as God's Word then I fear for you when you face severe opposition and persecution.

Persecutors at Work

There is a lot of great and good work going on in 1 Thessalonians 2. Apostles working hard to faithfully communicate the gospel. Apostles working hard to establish new believers in the Christian faith. The Word of God working to transform an entire Christian community and enable them to imitate other Christians who are prepared to suffer for their faith. But there are those who work hard to achieve evil purposes. There is a popular saying, "Idle hands are the devil's workplace." However, there are some hard-working hands as well that Satan is quick to use. The Thessalonian Christians experienced such persecution at the hands of fellow Gentiles, their own countrymen. However, Paul finishes this section by emphasising the ardent efforts of his fellow Jews to stifle the communication of the gospel and to put Paul and people like him out of work: "They displease God and are hostile to all men *in their effort* to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved" (v16).

Let's sum up. We need to manifest "the work of faith", "the labour of love" and "the endurance of hope" in our lives. If we are to be faithful communicators of the gospel our primary need is not the gift of the gab. It's hard work to persuade stubborn hearts and press on in the face of difficulty and even opposition. The hard work of the apostles abundantly expressed their faith, love and hope and confirms the integrity of God's Word. Let's honour that by placing our full confidence in the Bible as God's Word and allowing it to do its transforming work in our lives. We need that because we will need to be steeled as we devote ourselves to communicating the gospel since there will be those who work hard to thwart or prevent our efforts. May the Lord grant us a willingness to devote ourselves to hard work in gospel ministry, whether we do so as primary face-to-face communicators or in some other supportive capacity.