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I Thessalonians
II. Gentle Among You
I Thessalonians 2:1-16

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The late Catholic priest and writer, Richard John Neuhaus, tells of attending a revival when he was seven years old. He remembers great crowds of people and large amounts of wonderful food. But what he remembers most is the preacher. The preacher had a dramatic flair and a fiery urgency concerning the unsaved. In one of his sermons at the revival, the preacher had stopped suddenly in the middle of his message and begun staring at his watch. For a full minute there was silence as he looked at his watch. And then, he threw out his arms and said, “*In the last one minute, thirty-seven thousand souls have gone to eternal damnation without a saving knowledge of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*” Neuhaus writes:

It was, I believe, the first theological crisis of my life. This seven-year-old boy was electrified. I immediately put my mind to work figuring out how many minutes we had been sitting there while thirty-seven thousand people per minute were going to hell. I looked around and was puzzled to see everyone else taking the news so calmly. Mrs. Appier was straightening the bow in her daughter’s hair, and Mr. Radke was actually smiling as he nodded approval at the preacher’s words. Hadn’t they heard what he said? In my agitated state, I wanted to jump up and shout that we had better get going right now to tell those . . . people about Jesus. The real crisis came later, however . . . The next morning I discovered that the visiting preacher and my Dad, who was the pastor of the host church, were taking three days off to go fishing . . .

Slowly, [an] explanation began to recommend itself: The mission festival preacher didn’t really mean what he said. Not really. And everybody understood that, except me. After a time, my initial alarm subsided as I came to think that he and they did not mean it at all, that it was just “church talk” and not to be taken too seriously.¹

I tell that story for two reasons. One, because that preacher was absolutely right about the urgency of evangelism, despite how everyone responded. That revival meeting took place in the 1940’s. And if that revival preacher was worried about lost souls back then, when most every American believed in God and belonged to a church, I can’t even imagine how concerned he would be in our day. In this present moment, over thirty percent of the American people say they do not

believe in God. In this present moment, less than fifty percent of the American people belong to a church. And, in this present moment, among the American people who do still believe in God and do still belong to a church, less than one-third of them attend church on even a semi-regular basis. So when it comes to the urgency of evangelism, brothers and sisters in Christ, we are in need of it right now. The last thing the American churches ought to be doing is plodding along in complacency.

But I tell you that story because it also serves as a good lesson in how not to go about evangelism. “Turn or burn” has, in one form or another, been the substance of the evangelistic approach in America for generations – going all the way back to Jonathan Edwards and his infamous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” In the first place, that approach is not going to be very effective when a third of the population needing to be reached doesn’t even believe in God, much less in concepts like heaven and hell. But second, and even more so, “turn or burn” is not the message Jesus gave us to declare. John 3:16 does not read, *“For God was so fed up and furious with the world, that He sent His only Son in order to scare the sinners straight.”* No, *“For God so loved the world,”* it says. Jesus came to love us into faith, not to terrify us into a panic about going to hell.

But if there is an even great urgency in our age for the church, and for individual Christians, to take up the work of bearing witness to others, as Christ has commanded us; and if the old methods won’t work and, in any case, were theologically screwed-up to begin with, then how do we bear witness? How shall we do this work which Christ calls us to do – remember: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”*²

Well, we need look no further than Paul, the greatest evangelist of them all, to learn how to do this work. And pretty much this whole second chapter of I Thessalonians is Paul describing how he did his work of evangelism. So let us learn from the expert. For Paul, and so for us, this work of evangelism begins not in what we say or do, but in what we think and believe. Real evangelism begins in our own deep conviction that the Gospel really is true – truly true, truer than any other truth we could ever know. And not only “true for me” – that silly modern hemming and hawing around the possibility than such a thing as objective truth could even exist in the first place – but, indeed, objectively true for everybody, everywhere and all the time. And not only true, in that grand and absolute sense, but also that the Gospel is the best truth that could ever be known by a person. The best good news a human being could ever hope to hear. So true and so good that it has captured our hearts as well as our heads. *“We had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God, [even] in the midst of much conflict.”* For Paul, despite persecution and prison, the Gospel was so good and so true that nothing could make him stop wanting to share it with others.

And that is where effective evangelism begins – in our conviction that we have a message people desperately need to hear. A truth which will bless them like nothing else ever could – heal them, help them, hold them in a way no earthly truth ever could. All around us, every day, are so many people in desperate need of what the Gospel alone has to give.

For example, Peter Marty, a Lutheran pastor and editor of the Christian Century magazine tells a story about an encounter with just such a soul in need:

Jason and I retreated to the ICU waiting room to talk about his mother's precipitous decline. Moments earlier the attending physician had spoken of her imminent death. "Six to 12 hours—maybe," he said. I wanted to chat with Jason.

Marie is very familiar to me from our congregation; her son far less so. A well-employed 44-year-old techie, he doesn't take to religion. Best I can tell, it feels superfluous to his larger contentment in life. Because he looked uncomfortable with what was going on that day, I asked him if he was. "Yeah, I am. I don't wanna be here."

"Why's that?" I asked. "Are you uncomfortable because we're in a hospital, or is it the struggle to let Mom go?"

"Both," he said. "I've never been in a hospital, believe it or not, and I don't like it here. And, yeah, I don't have any idea what to do with her death. It's gonna be a huge . . . I don't know what." His voice trailed off.

As I looked into Jason's eyes, it felt like I was peering into a lost soul: a grown man with no idea of where to turn next or what to do with the death of the one who brought him into this world.³

There are so many people around us each day like Jason – people who are indeed lost before life's mysteries and tragedies, people who are lonely and feel no one cares about them, people longing for something more than what their own achievements and dreams have brought them, discouraged and disillusioned by the fact that the world's promises never add up to much in the end. And we – you and I – we have the Word they desperately need to hear. The Good News that will change their hearts, change their lives, change their hopeless sorrows into redeemed rejoicings. If we truly believe the Gospel to be both true and the best possible news that a person could ever hope to hear, then how can we not, with joy, share with them what we have come to know?

But how do we share it? What method should we use? Well, there is no one right, guaranteed for success, acceptable to Jesus method. In fact, different persons, different situations may well require different approaches. But Paul does tell us that one single principle needs to undergird every approach, every method of evangelism – and it is not efficiency or effectiveness, rather it is love. A genuine feeling of Christian love toward the one, for the one, to whom we wish to witness: "*But we were gentle among you,*" says Paul, "*like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.*" Can we imagine a more tender, more loving image than that to describe evangelism? And that, says Paul, if not the method, is most definitely the undergirding principle of evangelism. Love. Gentle among you. Not getting up in someone's face and asking, "*Are you going to hell?*" Not fear tactics, but love's outreach. Gentle among you genuine love and concern for the one with whom we wish to share the Gospel. If we don't do this out of love and with love, our message will not be of Christ, nor will it be well-received.

Micheal Elliott, then pastor of a church and head of a ministry to the homeless in Savannah, tells the story of the conversion of Chester. Chester spent forty-five years as an alcoholic street

person. One day, out of the blue, Chester quit drinking. He started coming to church and faithfully attending an outpatient substance abuse program. In time, Chester began to volunteer at the shelter, faithfully doing for others what had once been done for him. Chester became a pillar of the church. After a few years, Elliott asked Chester to share his conversion story with the congregation. Chester stood before a full sanctuary and said:

People ask me all the time how I was able to quit drinking after forty-five years. They want to know how someone like me can spend his time cooking food for others, giving out clothes, studying my Bible. Well, it was easy. I found Jesus. I had heard about him for a long time. I heard he was in the Bible or in some church or another. Sometimes I would go looking for him in those places, but I never found him. Then one day I stumbled across him. He was in the faces of the people [of this] church. I knew right then I wanted to be a part.⁴

Commenting on Chester's story, Elliott writes:

Love those around you and keep loving them even when they are very unlovely in return. Then through the loving, the unlovely will begin to love . . . and we are the unlovely ones, you and I. We so desperately desire love, because it is only love that can make us complete. And we are all incomplete . . . But if we love, if we will love beyond our limits, then we will find what we seek . . .

God is love, John says, and if we love then we choose to side with God in a world full of unlovely people. When the unlovely begin to love, forgiveness happens. When the unlovely begin to love, revival comes. When the unlovely begin to love, the [Kingdom] of God is not far behind.⁵

"Gentle among you." How we do evangelism matters less, says Paul, than the spirit with which we approach the one we are seeking to reach with the Gospel. God approached us in love in our own story of salvation. And love is how God asks us to approach those now who are not yet saved – to love them as He has first loved us.

And the last thing Paul teaches us here about evangelism is that it is not just our words which matter, but the content of our characters and the conduct of our lives. In other words, our words will more likely be heard if our lives also convey them. True evangelism is when we don't just tell people that Jesus can make a difference in their lives, but also when our lives demonstrate to them the difference Jesus has made in ours. "You are witnesses, and God also," Paul writes, "how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you . . ."

So not just through what we say, but also by how we live. Paul has a rather captivating image of this same point in his second letter to the Corinthians:

*But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphant procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.*⁶

Don't you love that image? Our lives are the aroma of Christ, the fragrance of God, by which those outside the faith catch a whiff of His grace, His truth, His love – and are so drawn towards Him.

Rita Snowden tells of visiting a small town near Dover, England. She was having afternoon tea at an outdoor café when she became aware of an unbelievably pleasant fragrance filling the air around her. She asked the waiter where this fragrance was coming from, and the waiter told her it was coming from the people passing by in the street. He explained that they all worked in a perfume factory and were on their way home. When they left the factory, they carried with them the fragrance, which had permeated their clothing during the workday. Snowden immediately seized upon this as an illustration of the church's life. That the love, grace, and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ so permeates our lives that when we leave this sanctuary to go back out into the world, we will trail the fragrance of Christ's goodness, mercy, and love everywhere that we go.⁷

And that aroma of our character and conduct, says Paul, is key to our evangelism – the key to our words, God's Word, being heard and received by those to whom we are speaking. That they can perceive in us the difference Christ has made can make the difference in their willingness to hear and receive Christ. *“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.”* Not just with our words, but with our very lives we bear witness to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so the master evangelist has now taught us. Thus instructed, let us go therefore and make disciples in this present age of Christian decline in America, just as Jesus commanded His disciples to do in every age. He greatly needs us to prove faithful in this work. The people who are perishing greatly need us to prove faithful in this work. And Jesus will bless and make fruitful our labors for Him. Despite how it may look with the great decline of Christianity in our day, Christianity will never die in our land as long as there are faithful Christians willing to bear witness to the Good News of the Gospel.

¹ Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), pp. 154-155.

² Matthew 28:19-20.

³ Peter W. Marty, “Accumulated Faith,” *The Christian Century*, Vol. 141, No. 2 (February, 2024), p. 1.

⁴ Micheal Elliott, *The Society of Salty Saints* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer-Stone Books, 1987), p. 70.

⁵ Source unknown.

⁶ II Corinthians 2:14-15.

⁷ Source unknown.