

## CONFRONTED

1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

The apostle Paul had a lot of opposition and challenges to the work he was doing. A lot of that work involved interacting with and helping local churches (many of which he was instrumental in starting) that were struggling and needed encouragement. Warren Wiersbe noted that it was not easy to be a Christian in Thessalonica where believers faced persecution and suffering. Their situation explains Paul's choice of words: affliction (which means "pressure from circumstances"); suffered; persecuted (meaning "driven out and rejected"); contrary (used of winds that blow against and hinder progress); and hindered (which pictures a road so broken up that travel is blocked).

In Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonica we can find examples of what can be done to show genuine care for others. There are many situations that come to our attention where other people have problems and challenges and we feel empathy for them in their situations. Empathic feelings are essential if we are going to demonstrate genuine concern, however, these feelings are just the starting point. Most of the time, we never get past the point of "feeling."

Why is it that we don't get beyond the feeling stage? It could be a matter of priorities. Most of us are focused on ourselves and our needs or desires so much that we just can't find the time or the resources to be involved with the needs of others. There is one thing that we can do even when we have just a little extra time and very limited resources. Something that can actually be beneficial to them is to "pray for them" asking God to do something to help in such situations. Another more evidentiary action we can do even with limited resources is to let them know that we are concerned about them (have empathy) and we are praying for them. In Paul's day, sending a letter was not as easy as it is for us today. We have many convenient ways to communicate our concerns for people who have needs. An encouraging word can have life changing impacts on people who are suffering and struggling with the challenges of life that can range from just ordinary tasks to catastrophes.

### Received – 2:13-14

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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, 1 Thessalonians 2:13–14 (ESV)

We are constantly bombarded with information or "news" about what is happening and many times we get a lot of ideas from various sources of why things are happening and the likely impact of what is going on. How much of what we hear, can we trust to be "truth" or just someone's "opinion?" This question may have been on the minds of people in Thessalonica when they first heard Paul, Silas and Timothy. Obviously, some strongly rejected Paul and the message he shared, but others recognized what he told them as "the word of God."

An important question that we should consider is "What made the difference in these two radically different responses?" Receiving the word requires a proper view of the world and, to some extent, our approach to life. One of the five factors that are predictors of performance is "openness" or what we might think of as willingness to consider new ideas or being willing to try something different. Openness has been correlated with higher intelligence and being imaginative. The opposite of openness is being closed minded and an assumption that "we have already learned everything there is to learn, so don't confuse us with facts." Being "open" does

not mean that a person automatically accepts ever new idea that emerges, but is willing to put forth some effort to determine the validity of what is stated or what they might personally witness with their own eyes. This was the approach of the Berean church. All of us can remember accounts of the response of the Jewish leaders to the teaching of Jesus even to the point of ignoring the obvious miracles that happened.

Just as communication requires a sender and a receiver, learning takes a teacher and a learner. The teacher's role is very important; however, the role of the learner is equally important. Unless the learner is in "receiving" mode, then all the teaching in the world will not be effective.

In Deut 5:1 Moses gave a prescription for effective learning:

And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them.

Notice the four key words Hear, Learn, Keep, and Do. We can see elements of this prescription in the response of the believers in Thessalonica. They heard the word and received it. Some times we hear things that we do NOT receive simply because we cannot agree with it. If we don't receive a teaching, then we have not learned. If we do not receive and learn how it applies to our lives, then we cannot keep or retain the teaching. If we do not retain what we learned, then the principles will not have any lasting influence on our lives. This could explain why some attend church every Sunday and sit under the teaching of the word and it makes little or no difference in the way they live. The ultimate evidence that a teaching has been received and learned and had an impact is seen in the "doing" of what was taught.

Paul saw evidence in the lives of the believers in Thessalonica – their behavior had changed from what it used to be (like that of the world) and they then behaved as other believers in other churches (showing the character of Christ). The word "imitators" used in most of the newer translations is not intended to have a negative connotation of implying that they were just "acting out a part." The behavior was genuine and was a result of the changes produced in their lives as a result of the work God was doing in their lives because they had received and embraced the truth. The fact that similar works were in evidence is a testimony to the fact that the same Spirit was at work in these separate groups of believers.

If we are going to be effective in teaching others, then we must first learn effectively. Effective learning is not a onetime event, but is ongoing. We should be constantly learning new truths and constantly sharing what we have learned with others.

When people respond properly to the truth of God's word, there are consequences. The first consequence is that their lives are changed. Another consequence is that opposition will arise from those who reject the truth. When Paul proclaimed the reign of another king when he was in Thessalonica, the people took offense because of their allegiance to the Roman emperor (Acts 17:7). To abandon their allegiance to Caesar meant abandoning their social, religious, and civic obligations. These differences in allegiances were part of the reason that believers in Thessalonica experienced persecution and affliction by their own people (1 Thess 2:14). When the believers in Thessalonica turned to God and abandoned their idols, they also abandoned civic obligations associated with idolatry and even their allegiance to Caesar. (For contrast, considered what the Jews said to Pilate before Christ was crucified: "we have no king but Caesar.") The persecution that the Thessalonian believers suffered likely consisted of social exclusion and religious shame.

Paul told the Thessalonians that persecution is the expectation, not the exception. Jesus, Paul, and the prophets all experienced suffering at the hand of their own people.

### Rejected – 2:15-16

<sup>15</sup> who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind <sup>16</sup> 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! 1 Thessalonians 2:15–16 (ESV)

Paul summarized the range and extent of persecutions from his own countrymen. They actually killed people for what they said that did not agree with their true beliefs. Killing prophets who opposed those in power was not uncommon in the history of Israel. Some of the more recent incidents of such treachery were John the Baptist, Jesus, and Stephen that Paul had witnessed. The persecution of the church in Jerusalem became very intense and many of the believing Jews were driven out of Jerusalem. Not only were the non-believing Jews rebellious against God, they harbored ill will toward the rest of the world. They had no understanding that God’s covenant with Abraham regarding “all the nations of the earth would be blessed” was related to the coming of the Messiah that would reverse the disunity related to the Tower of Babel judgment. Their hyper-tribalism outlook on the world had been embodied in their tradition though additions to the law for a long time. For example, it was criminal to share the “word of the law” with a Gentile. A carry over effect of this mind-set even impacted some of the early Jewish believers in the church in Jerusalem in that they opposed what Paul was doing in taking the gospel to non-Jewish people.

The persecution of Christians by the Jews was just as real as the persecution by the Romans. Since the Jews had failed to recognize their opposition to God and to repent of it, it just kept accumulating (to fill up) in the cup of God’s judgment that was being made ready to be “poured out” on them. This expectation that recurring sin eventually reaches a breaking point and triggers God’s judgment was common in Jewish understanding of the way God operates.

### Focused – 2:17-20

<sup>17</sup> But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, <sup>18</sup> because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. <sup>19</sup> For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? <sup>20</sup> For you are our glory and joy. 1 Thessalonians 2:17–20 (ESV)

Paul did not want them to think that his hasty departure was an indication that he had abandoned them. The ability to show concern and do things that provide care to others is contingent on having established a relationship with the persons involved. Paul, Silas and Timothy had been with the Christians at Thessalonica for a relatively short period of time before the Jews stirred up so much trouble that (for safety reasons) they were sent away to Berea. The account in Acts 17 indicated that they had reasoned in the synagogues for three Sabbaths before the Jews stirred up the city. This was the occasion when they had been accused of “turning the world upside down.” The bottom line was that the Christians in Thessalonica were very new in the faith. Yet they had flourished and in this part of Paul’s letter he wanted to encourage them in the face of the hardships they were encountering.

Paul definitely had a connection with these people even though he was hundreds of miles away. We would say “he was absent in body, but not in spirit;” or “they were out of sight, but not out of mind.” We use this saying even today to try to communicate the empathic connection we have with family and friends. However, it is just not the same as being there. It wasn’t for lack of wanting to be there that kept Paul away.

Paul put the blame on Satan for his not being able to get back to Thessalonica. There were opposition and false teaching that hindered Paul as he went about establishing churches in various areas. Clearly, such opposition was either inspired by Satan or useful to his purposes. At another time in Paul’s ministry, he recognized that God prevented him from going to Asia

Minor. It is important for us to have discernment to recognize the source of circumstances that impact the situations we encounter in life. From Thessalonica he went to Berea and the Jews followed him there to stir up trouble. From there he moved on to Athens and encountered additional false teachings from the philosophers (in addition to the opposition he already had from the Jews).

Paul certainly was burdened for these Christians who were going through suffering, and yet he also had joy since Jesus had promised that even though tribulation would happen, they would be victorious because they were in Christ. These Christians were special to Paul since he saw them as a positive outcome (approval) of the hard work and sacrifice that he and others had invested in the work that God had called them to do. The “reward” for what Paul had done was simply knowing and having assurance that these believers were counted among the saved and they were standing before the Lord Jesus. They were in His presence. This realization made all the persecutions and problems bearable and gave evidence that God was at work in what He had called Paul to do.

Paul saw the church at Thessalonica as a prime example of the way new Christians were to conduct themselves as a local church. They gave Paul hope that the work he, Silas, and Timothy were doing was accomplishing something good. Paul could point to this church as a model. One sure way to show care and concern for a person is to find the good and positive attributes they have and let them know that you noticed.

What about our church – would people use us as an example of how to do church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?