

2: The Servant of Christ

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

This outline consists of three parts, the first of which provides the background to a better understanding of this Bible passage.

The second gives a few remarks about several texts.

The third gives a few starting points for the discussion.

1. The background of this Bible passage

In chapter 1, Paul expressed his thankfulness for the course taken in Thessalonica. The church blossomed through faith, hope and love. The Gospel bore fruit in that church; to such an extent, that it was talked about near and far. And the work of the Holy Spirit in the congregation in Thessalonica drew attention throughout Greece.

In chapter 2 Paul looks back from the fruits to the time when there were no fruits: that time when he and Silas first arrived in Thessalonica. It was only after they had brought the Gospel of God that growth began. Paul seeks the origin of the rich harvest which now is visible, in the sowing which he had done at that time in Thessalonica (see verse 1).

Paul now digresses on the origin of that harvest in Thessalonica. He elaborates on his *own* labour at that time. How he came to be in Macedonia, how he worked and preached there (verses 2-12).

The Bible passage before us therefore seems to be a somewhat self-satisfied statement. It gives the impression that Paul is boasting somewhat. Things are going well in Thessalonica. Sure. But don't forget all the things *I* have done to make that happen. Does Paul attribute the harvest to his *own* work, carried out at that time? It does seem rather presumptuous of the apostle to elaborate about the unselfish and self-denying manner in which he worked in the congregation which was established in Thessalonica. Isn't he in conflict with the words of Proverbs which state that another should praise you and not your own mouth? (Prov. 27:2).

However, before accusing the apostle of these kinds of faults, you should take note of the context. Paul said in chapter 1: *God be praised and the Holy Spirit thanked for what happened to you.* Paul immediately made it clear that he did not praise them, the Thessalonians, for doing such a good job, but traces their commendable church life back to the work of *God*. He now emphasises that in chapter 2 by saying: *you know well enough that the beginning of your faith did not start through human influence or through my craftiness, but only through Christ, of Whom I was only a servant.* By presenting himself as the servant of Christ, Paul does not praise himself, but only continues to emphasise that what had been planted and borne fruit in Thessalonica, was the work of Christ. Paul had not conquered the people or cunningly roped them in. Paul had simply behaved as a servant of Christ ought. That is why also the origin of the faith of the congregation can only be attributed to the Saviour.

There is another aspect that must also be taken into account in this Bible passage. We sometimes get the idea that Paul was just about the only person at that time who travelled the world proclaiming a religious message. And then we tend to think that everyone was impressed by Paul because now they were suddenly confronted by someone from abroad telling them he had a message from God.

The reality was very different, however. The world of those days teemed with itinerant peddlers of religion. There were all kinds of people going from place to place with one or other religious message. There were the travelling philosophers who held popular discourses for the people in the market place about a reasonable religion. There were oriental magicians who performed mysterious miracles in the name of some strange god or other. There were Egyptian priests of the goddess Isis. And so-called Persian magis who brought teachings about the stars. Others just made up stories. Idealists, magicians, swindlers, dreamers, fanatics and thinkers: all moved from town to town to speak to the people. If their audience was captivated, they sometimes stayed for a long time.

Amidst all those Paul also travelled around. Another a wanderer with a message. So you can imagine that it was important to him that people realised he was not bringing his *own* message, and did not come on his own behalf. They had to see that he was a totally

different kind of person than all those other wandering heralds. Paul had to make a considerable effort to prove he was not just one preacher in a long line of many. And that Christ was not on the same level as all those other so-called gods. Because of the honour due to Christ as the Lord of lords it was necessary for Paul to behave quite differently from all of those itinerant philosophers and magicians, etc.

In this Bible passage Paul often had to distance himself from these kinds of people. When the apostle emphasises his selflessness, you must not think he is praising himself. He simply brings to mind once again that he behaved very differently from most of the other travelling preachers, who were usually only after money and personal gain. No, he was in the service of Another. Paul was different from others. The Gospel is different from other teachings in the world. It does not come from people, but from God.

When you keep this background in mind, you will be able to find points in this Bible passage that confirm this.²

2. Some points from this Bible passage

In verses 1-4 you must imagine exactly how Paul had arrived in Thessalonica. Let the introducer not forget then also to provide a summary of Acts 16:6-17:14. God called Paul and Silas to Macedonia, but already in the first town (Philippi) it appears to be a great failure. Few desire Christ's message. There seems to be no-one any more who says: 'Come over and help me.' Wounded and battered, Paul and Silas have to leave Philippi. If they had been *human* preachers and if they had wanted to bind people to themselves with cunning, they would have been smart enough to use different tactics in Thessalonica than in Phillipi. They would not have repeated the risk of bringing a gospel which was apparently very unpopular in Macedonia. Yet when Paul and Silas arrive in Thessalonica, God gives them courage and boldness. Without concern about the consequences, they again start witnessing boldly of Jesus Christ. In that way they showed very clearly that they had not come to please men, but were intent on pleasing *God*. God, Who had previously tested Paul on this point

2. For the introducer: begin your introduction with a clear summing up of chapter 1, and then point out that there is no evidence here of Paul being arrogant, even though it may appear so at first.

through his trials in Philippi. The apostle passed that test and aimed to please his Sender, *not* the people, also in Thessalonica (verse 4).

In verses 5-7 it is possible to see clearly the great difference between the servant of Christ and the many other itinerant people, who were working for selfish gain or popularity, those who thus had to use flattery or pretend to be more important than they really were to gain attention and respect. Completely different than the servant of Christ, who does not flatter or impress, but warmly and humbly brings the Word of his Sender.

In verses 8 to 12 we must remember that Paul's refusal of material gain was related to his Gospel work. Later we often see him accept financial assistance from the Macedonian churches. His motive for initially earning his keep by using his manual skills was to avoid any possible suggestion that he had any self-interest in bringing the Gospel, as was often the case of the travelling magicians and philosophers. The people in Thessalonica could see by Paul's hard work that the Gospel was not for his *own* glory but that of his Sender, and that Paul was only interested in that those people would start to serve that Sender.

This lack of self-interest was also shown in the merciful and tender way in which Paul treated the people of Thessalonica (see verses 8 and 11). He was only a servant. God called. That was how it had started. *Now* there is a rich harvest, simply because *God* had sowed through His servant Paul. Therefore, thanks be to God (see verse 13).

3. A theme for discussion

When the introducer has presented this Bible passage and the introduction has been discussed, further discussion can focus on the theme: The office-bearers of Christ. There is plenty of material for consideration in this passage.

For example, the following points:

a. The office-bearers must always guard against doing their work and bringing their message to the taste and liking of the people. Every office-bearer is responsible to God for his work. Therefore he must not be afraid to admonish, if necessary. People usually like a friendly visit more than an exhortation to serve the Lord,

but office-bearers may not let that influence them. God judges their hearts (verses 3-4).

b. At the same time office-bearers must not admonish or exhort in an overbearing, arrogant manner, as if commanding. They should rather be friendly, demonstrating love. It is not *their* admonition, but Christ's. And office-bearers are also responsible to God for doing their work with much love and patience. (Which images does the apostle use in this Bible passage to portray this love? 1 Thess 2: 7, 8,11).

c. Office bearers can never do their task as 'hirelings'. It requires the devotion of the whole personality. This does not mean that a minister can be paid a pittance. That he is often prepared to do this, demonstrates his selflessness. But even if a minister receives a generous remuneration (1 Corinthians 9:7), then he, as well as the elders, could do his work in either of two ways. As work that is done impersonally, or as work in which he gives himself. The latter is necessary. Because work that is done in that office without love, suffers from anaemia (verse 8).

d. In this respect read and discuss 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15 together.