

The Heart of a Leader

By Linda Rex

November 5, 2023, Proper 26 | After Pentecost—In last week’s message we took a look at the heart of a shepherd, which is meant to be formed after and by the heart of the Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ. The heart of a shepherd was likened by the apostle Paul with that of a nursing mother tenderly caring for her child.

Moving into the passage for this Sunday, 1 Thessalonians 2:9–13, we find that the apostle Paul is still feeling the need to defend his ministry from the criticisms of those who opposed it. The apostle explained that he cared for the members of the church as a father would train and teach his children, encouraging and exhorting them to grow up in Christ. At the same time, Paul and his co-workers worked day and night doing hard labor in order to provide for themselves, so that the believers in Thessalonica would not have to support them. Any preaching or teaching had to be done while they were working or in the late afternoons and evenings when their other work was done.

This pattern of physical labor, self-support, and pastoral ministry was an important mark of Paul’s love and concern for the believers he ministered to and cared for. Additionally, Paul and his co-workers were diligent to live in such a manner that it was obvious to the believers, as it was to God, that they were behaving “devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly” toward the believers in everything they said and did. And it was also clear to the members of the church at Thessalonica that Paul and his co-workers weren’t just preaching the Word—they were living it out in their lives, doing their best to model self-sacrificial service and love just as Jesus, the living Word, had done while here on earth.

This is a profound contrast with the spiritual leaders Jesus confronted in the Gospel reading for this Sunday, Matthew 23:1–12. Jesus told the crowds and his disciples to beware of the spiritual leaders of his day who were more concerned about the adulation of the crowds and stuffing their pouches full of money than they were the needs and concerns of the people they cared for. They wanted to be elevated to positions of prominence at events, to be called “rabbi” or “teacher”, and to be greeted respectfully in the public square. While demanding strict legal obedience from their followers, their own hearts were filled with greed, selfishness, and pride. No wonder Jesus told his listeners not to follow their example.

What struck me when reading these two passages together was that, apart from Christ’s intervention in Paul’s life, he would have been one of those people Jesus described. In fact, he had been very much like those spiritual leaders Jesus said not to follow, for he had, as a law-abiding Pharisee, persecuted the early church and had sought the death and imprisonment of the believers.

But the miracle was, by the time the apostle was writing this letter to the church at Thessalonica, Paul had become a gift from God to the church at Thessalonica and the other churches of his day. Christ, by the Spirit, had done a transformational work in Paul’s mind and heart. This knowledge did not make Paul proud. Rather, it humbled him and gave him a powerful gospel message, one of salvation, redemption, faith, and patience for those to whom he ministered.

Our best witness for the God of Jesus Christ is the work the Spirit is doing and has done, in our own hearts and lives as God’s children. Authenticity, transparency, humility, and service are a hallmark of a follower of Jesus Christ.

Many pastors today are bi-vocational pastors who work a full or part time job while pastoring their churches. In many ways, they are following the model of Paul and the early church leaders.

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As they and the members they serve live out an authentic Christ-centered life within their community, each person has many opportunities to share the good news with others just as Paul did. As believers follow Christ and open their hearts and minds to the Spirit, growing in their own personal relationship with Jesus Christ, they are able to share the good news of Jesus Christ with those they meet just as Paul and his co-workers shared it with the people of their day.

Heavenly Father, thank you for those you have called and gifted to serve as pastors and spiritual mentors. By your Spirit, make us humble servant-hearted believers who care for others, and enable us to live out and share the life of Christ you are forming within us with others. Grant us the grace to be transparent, authentic, humble and ever willing to serve, in Jesus' name. Amen.

“For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.” 1 Thessalonians 2:9–13
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