

Life-on-life Influence

1 Thessalonians 2

I became a follower of Christ when I was 20 years old. I was a sophomore in college at the University of Southern Mississippi. I was invited to play basketball with a group of guys on Friday afternoons; then I was invited to attend a Bible study; over time I fell in love with Jesus through the life that my new friends were living. I began meeting weekly with a guy named Bob Bowen who was on staff with a campus ministry. Even though I'd grown up going to church, this was the first time I really engaged in spiritual conversations. I was able to ask him any question about anything.

That fall I transferred to LSU to major in architecture. I refer to that experience as "the longest six weeks of my life." While at LSU I got involved in a campus ministry. Over the course of the next three years other men invested in me spiritually. They taught me foundational spiritual practices from them: how to study the Bible, how to share my faith, how to pray, etc. As well, I was given the opportunity to lead a Bible study in a dorm. Three guys in that study became my closest friends in college. We studied the Bible together, we shared Christ with others together, we got to know each others' families, we became brothers in Christ. The week before I graduated we went to the LSU track stadium late one night and reenacted John 13; we washed each other's feet and told each other how much the past three years had meant. Chip is a sod farmer in Georgia; Jim is a high school teacher in Kentucky; Scott is a pastor in Baton Rouge.

Three and a half years earlier, if you had told me, "Steve, God is going to give you spiritual friendships that will leave you committed to life-on-life ministry," I wouldn't have known what you were talking about. But that's what happened. What we're going to see today from 1 Thessalonians 2 is that life-on-life ministry is a very foundational biblical pattern. As I'll explain, there is a great need for this type of ministry here at Faith and in the body of Christ in general. Younger believers need older and more mature believers to give them a real-life example of what it means to walk with Jesus. In this way Christianity goes from being abstract ideas to an accessible way of living our lives.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 Paul defends his methods and motives while sharing the gospel in Thessalonica. The evidence suggests that people outside the church had accused Paul of being just one more traveling philosopher who would do anything to gain a following. They accused him of being deceptive and self-serving. In these verses Paul defends himself. In the process he gives us a clear example of life-on-life ministry.

We'll notice Paul's example and then talk about how we can have the same type of life-on-life influence today.

Paul's Example of Life-on-life Influence (1 Thessalonians 2:1-12)

Paul repeatedly appeals to the Thessalonians' own experience with him. He begins by saying, "For you yourselves know. . ." He wasn't trying to convince them of something beyond their experience with him; he was reminding them of what they knew to be true.

1 For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain.

The entire first chapter of 1 Thessalonians rehearsed the fruitfulness of Paul's first visit. Paul had presented the gospel with great conviction and with the power of the Holy Spirit (1:5). The Thessalonians had welcomed this message about Jesus and began to exhibit great faith, hope, and love. They were well aware that his first visit was not in vain/empty.

In verse 2 Paul reminded them that when they arrived in Thessalonica they had just been persecuted in Philippi.

2 But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.

Acts 16 records how Paul was persecuted in Philippi. He and Silas had been beaten and imprisoned in violation of Paul's right to a fair trial as a Roman citizen. In the middle of the night Paul and Silas were in prison "praying and singing hymns" when earthquake shook the jail and flung open the prison doors. Nobody would have blamed Paul if he laid low and took it easy for a while. But when they showed up in Thessalonica (as Acts 17 explains) they picked up right where they'd left off in Philippi; they declared the good news about Jesus in the midst of much conflict. All of this suggests that Paul surely didn't have selfish motives! To the contrary:

3 For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.

Paul mentions three things about their motives in verse 3. First, their message about Jesus contained no error; they spoke the truth about Jesus and the life He offers. Second, their motives contained no impurity, a term that often had the connotation of sexual impurity (see 1 Thess. 4:7). It may well be that they had been accused of gathering a following so that they could take advantage of people sexually. Religious prostitution was common in that day. Third, they made no attempt to deceive (or trick) the Thessalonians into following Christ. They didn't promise them things that the death and resurrection of Jesus hadn't secured.

As good stewards of the gospel, we learn in verse 4, their primary loyalty was to the One who had entrusted them with the gospel, God Himself. Before God they had clean hearts when it came to their presentation of the gospel.

Paul is a great example to all of us as we share Christ with people - whether family, friends, or coworkers. If I share Christ with you, my motivation should be to please God by being honest and accurate with the gospel. I shouldn't share Christ because it makes me feel good or because it makes me look spiritual. I should have a heart-felt compassion to you experience the life that only Jesus offers.

5 For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. 6 Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.

Paul was passionate about people coming to Christ. But he never watered down the message; he never manipulated people with flattery; he never preached the gospel for personal gain; he never sought personal glory.

In verses 7 through 12 Paul uses analogies to explain how his relationship with the Thessalonians involved the affections and the commitments found in a healthy, whole family. When you and I have life-on-life influence in the lives of others, it may not be as full-orbed as Paul's, but we can certainly imitate aspects of what we read here.

7 But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. 8 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.

It's touching to think of Paul as a grown man who had recently been beaten and imprisoned in Philippi being so very tender and affectionate toward the Thessalonians. A nursing mother has a fierce and tenacious love for her children; she gladly gives her life for her children. That was Paul's mindset toward the new believers in Thessalonica: "we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves/lives."

In the "digital age" where people get so much information and so many perspectives detached from relationships, there is a crying need for people to learn to walk with Christ from specific people who can honestly say what Paul said to the Thessalonians: "I have deep affection for you; I will share with you my very life because you are very dear to me." Having a transparent relationship with someone who is a few steps farther down the path from you could be the difference between spiritual health and spiritual disaster.

In verse 9 Paul reminds them how strenuously he worked to support himself financially while bringing them the gospel.

9 For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers.

As an apostle Paul did reserve the right to be supported financially by churches, but when he came into a city sharing the gospel he chose to work with his hands (he made tents, literally) so that he didn't burden new believers and to avoid the appearance of preaching the gospel as a commodity to be purchased (see also 1 Cor. 4:12, Acts 20:34).

In verses 11 and 12 Paul says that he approached his influence in their lives the way a good father does with his children.

11 For you know how, like a father with his children, 12 we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Notice that Paul “exhorted **each one of you**.” Surely there was general teaching, but Paul also gave individual attention to the believers there. This is what a good father does; different children need different proportions of support, encouragement, direction, challenge, etc. Paul was this type of father spiritually. If you read his letters written to individuals (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon), you will see how skillfully he addressed their specific needs, even taking into account their specific temperaments and circumstances.

In defending his motives, Paul gives this wonderful picture of life-on-life ministry.

Our Life-on-life Influence. I want us to think about ways that we can live out Paul’s example here at Faith and in the body of Christ here in Manhattan. Let’s first think about existing relationships and then about our aspirations for future relationships.

Existing Relationships. I’ll mention just a few ways that we can pay attention to existing relationships with a view toward having life-on-life influence in the lives of others.

Life Groups (Bible studies). Whether here at Faith or in another context (such as a campus ministry), such groups are a place to develop spiritual friendships that can sometimes grow into substantive life-on-life ministry. Our encouragement would be to participate in such groups very intentionally. If you are passive and expect others to do all the relational work, you probably won’t develop spiritual friendships. But if you seek to live out the one another of Scripture, the sky is the limit. Doing so provides the context for developing spiritual friendships: praying for one another, serving one another, bearing one another’s burdens, speaking the truth to one another. Sometimes life-on-life ministry grows out of these spiritual friendships.

Parenting. If you have children (or grandchildren), you have already been given the assignment of living out Paul’s example. You don’t merely impart words; you impart your very life.

About the best thing I’ve ever read about parenting is Eugene Peterson’s book *Like Dew Your Youth*. The title comes from Psalm 110:3 where one’s “youth” is likened to dew; it is temporary and will disappear if you wait long enough. He advocates seeing adolescence as an opportunity for parents to grow up. He makes the observation that many Christian parents quit growing; their parenting becomes one long lecture about how their kids should live their lives.

Peterson says that a much better (and biblical) approach is to see parenting as an apprenticeship. Parents should let their kids look over their shoulders and see how they

are living their lives. Parents, generally speaking, your life is much more interesting and much more influential (for better or worse) than your words. How about letting your kids look over your shoulder and see how you're resolving conflicts biblically, how you're dealing with the temptations in your life, how you "consider it joy when you suffer various trials," how you seek to be an ambassador for Christ, etc.

My kids were wholly unimpressed with my pastor skills, but when I shared real life situations with my kids, they were locked in. In some ways I think we practice on our kids and give our very best to other people's kids.

Sunday mornings. Sometimes people establish relationships on Sunday mornings that turn into deep spiritual friendships or mentoring relationships. Last week I witnessed a "goodbye" between a couple and a graduate student they met on a Sunday morning a couple of years ago; it was a very tender thing because God had used this couple in her life in a significant way.

At the beginning of the summer we started a new practice on Sunday mornings. After the benediction (the blessing at the end of the service), we ask you to turn and meet somebody near you that you don't yet know. We would like you to have a 2-3 minute conversation before you leave. I told a story that illustrates why we do this. One Sunday several years ago a man at Faith introduced himself to a college guy who was sitting next to him. This student had come to church by himself. They struck up a conversation and eventually a friendship. To make a long story short, this man ended up hiring this college student to work on his farm; this man disciplined him for 3 years. The back story is that this student came to church that morning because he was interested in a girl who came to Faith; she basically told him that unless he had a serious walk with God he didn't have a chance with her. There are worse reasons for going to church. . . Those two got married this summer and are doing well. Never underestimate what God might do in simple relationships

Workplace. I don't have time to develop this topic. But some of you do a masterful job of developing spiritual relationships and mentoring people in your workplace.

Future Relationships. As we look toward the future of Faith E Free (and the body of Christ in general), the need for people who excel in life-on-life ministry is greater and greater. Many of you weren't raised in a Christian home; therefore you haven't seen the Christian life lived out.

On occasion we have been able to pair up younger women with older women and younger men with older men. These relationships can be life-changing. Twelve or fifteen years ago a college student named Thomas White called me and said, "Steve, I was wondering if you would mentor me. I don't want to meet you at Starbucks for an hour each week. I'd like to come to your home and eat supper with you and your family each week; then maybe we could study the Bible and pray." My response was, "Uh, that's a bold ask, Thomas. I need to talk with my wife and get back to you." Brenda was up for this, so Thomas came over every week and had supper with us. Then he and I would go to the basement and talk, study Scripture, and pray. I would usually eventually have to

say, “Thomas, maybe you should leave now. . . I’ve got some other things to do tonight. . .” That was a life-giving relationship for both of us. He’s still a good friend.

We would love to see many, many of these relationships in the church. Some of you already excel at this type of life-on-life ministry. You’ve experienced it firsthand and you therefore have an intuitive sense of how you might disciple another person. Our leadership facilitates such relationships on occasion. But we sense that there is a much greater need that we’ve only begun to address.

My challenge to those of you who have been walking with Jesus for years is: ***Will you make it your ambition to be the type of person who can disciple/mentor others?***

Some of you are already this type of person; some of you are already giving away your lives as Paul did. This happens in one-on-one relationships as well as in small groups. The format can vary. What is essential is having the type of life that can serve as an example to others and then living transparently (as opposed to hiding your light under a bushel).

It is not presumptuous for you to think, “I want to get to a place in my life where I can say what Paul said (1 Corinthians 11:1), ‘Imitate me as I imitate Christ.’ I want to become the type of person who shares his/her very life with other people.” This is a godly aspiration. Paul, for example, wrote in 1 Timothy 3:1 that “if any man aspires to the office of overseer/elder, it is a fine work he desires to do.” We need men and women far beyond our team of elders and far beyond our pastoral staff who can and will do life-on-life ministry. This is part of our calling as the body of Christ. There is no backup plan. ***Will you make it your ambition to become a person who can disciple/mentor others?***