

Sermon: Listen, receive, do

1 Thes 2:1-16

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Introduction

Last week we began our sermon series on the first letter of St Paul to the brand new church in Thessalonica. We saw how this small congregation in that ancient megacity had turned from worshipping idols to serving the living God, and they now expected Jesus Christ to return from heaven as the judge and as the saviour.

The people in Thessalonica had had some rough times due to persecution, but they were steadfast in faith, love and hope.

The people were so enthusiastic that their faith quickly spread to the provinces around, like a wild-fire. Enthusiastic is the correct word for this: it comes from the Greek word EN THEOS. That means: In God.

But how do you maintain such faith? How to hold onto that first enthusiasm? How to make sure that it will not grow cold overtime, in the midst of the business and headaches of daily life?

In the second chapter of the letter, that we have read today, The Apostle Paul gives us some wisdom for the maintenance our Christian life.

1 Troubles

The context of Paul's advice for Christian living was that the small congregation in Thessalonica was facing some serious problems.

Last week we saw how Paul commended the church for having become imitators, mimics, of Jesus Christ and of himself, but now Paul writes that they had also become imitators of the churches in Judea.

Read 1 Thes 2:14-16. In our world where anti-Semitism is a great plague, we must be careful not to generalize such a verse to suggest that this is a Christian statement about Jews in general. That would be ridiculous, as Paul himself is a Jew and as he is addressing many Jewish followers of Jesus in the church in Thessalonica.

What Paul says is that the followers of Jesus in Thessalonica faced many problems from their own countrymen, just like the apostles and the followers

of Jesus Christ in Judea, faced many problems from Jews in Judea.

St Paul speaks in 1 Thes 2:2 about strong opposition that surrounded his preaching in the city of Thessalonica. He faced persecutions for the truth of God. And the church also suffered for being obedient to the Word that Paul had preached.

The story is ever the same; it is repeated in every age and in every county. Those who want to be serious about obeying the Word of God and following Jesus Christ will face problems.

Those countries where this is not the case, are a small minority on this earth. Every three minutes, one Christian on earth is killed for the simple fact that he or she is a Christian, according to statistics of human rights organizations.

But can we expect anything else? **Read John 15:18-21.** Pope Gregory the Great (540-604) said in a sermon (*Sermon on Ezekiel 1,9,12*):

Being despised by evildoers is a mark of approval, because when we begin to displease those who displease God it is a sign that we are to some degree righteous.

Suffering for Christ may not be nice, but it is a proof of discipleship. It shows that the word of God is at work in our hearts.

Paul was not distracted because of his problems related to his preaching of the Word – he continued to do so boldly. None of us should be distracted by the problems we may face for obeying our Lord or for being in Egypt that is in a state of insecurity and uncertain change.

We believe in a message that is for our salvation. Eternity is in our hearts. Let us be bold as that young church in Thessalonica and be just as open and talkative about our faith.

2 lifestyle of Christian leaders

In the midst of the problems of that ancient Church, Paul focused on how he dealt with the Christian Gospel, the Word, the message, and how the young church received it.

This is what the Christian faith is all about. Our faith is our response to a Word.

It is good that St Paul begins with some advice for those who lead and preach. The first important principle in good Christian leadership is to recognize that the message of the Gospel is not *our* message. In 1 Thes 2:4 Paul says that he is 'entrusted with the Gospel' by God.

The Gospel belongs to God, and Christian ministers must be careful to be found as good stewards of what God has entrusted to them. The emphasis is on faithfulness, on careful listening, not on originality. We have a precious message, received from God, and we hand this message over, carefully, to our congregation.

I guess that St Paul wrote so much about his own obedience to the Gospel, to the actual message that was given to him, in order to also encourage the congregation in Thessalonica to obediently follow that word. Paul was a careful listener to God's Word, and he wanted the congregation to do likewise.

The Word of God deserves obedience because the message, as Paul said, 'does not spring from error'. It springs from the highest source.

Now this concept might lead to pride. "I know the truth. I have God and his truth in my pocket."

But teachers and preachers, all Christians, are stewards only, not owners. We must be careful listeners, not creators of the message. There is no space for pride. If anything, the Word of God in our hand should create a measure of fear in us.

Reading, listening to God's Word, teaching it, should fill us with some fear as we must be careful not to change or adapt or misinterpret what God has entrusted to us.

In the context of teaching and preaching, deception, flattery, seeking honor from people are totally taboo. We are not trying to please men, or women, but God, and we do all we can to proclaim his word truthfully. *All* truth, even if that is not pleasing to us and to our congregation.

A good description of the task of the preacher and teacher I found in the writings of the late Roman Catholic Pope Paul VI (1897-1978) in *Evangeli Nuntiandi*:

The preacher of the Gospel will be a person who even at the price of personal renunciation and suffering always seeks the truth that he must transmit to others.

He never betrays or hides truth out of a desire to please men or in order to astonish or to shock, nor for the sake of originality or a desire to make an impression.

He does not refuse truth. He does not obscure revealed truth by being too idle to search for it or for the sake of his own comfort or out of fear. He does not neglect to study it.

I like that last statement... he does not neglect to study it. I personally need to find a bit more balance in my life in this respect. Since the beginning of August I have been enthusiastically working to renew this compound and the church, to start this new congregation and a new Arabic congregation on Sunday night, and to create policies and new habits.

But now, I have to find a better balance – I have to spend more time in prayer, study, and yes also in pastoral work. Pray for me please that I will soon find this balance, the time, the mental space as well

Paul does not only speak of the need to present the Word of God truthfully, he only mentions *how* the Word should be presented in the midst of the Church. **Read 1 Thes 2:7-8.**

A teacher of the Word must be like a mother who gently feeds the congregation by also sharing himself with the people. Paul did not turn his converts over to babysitters. He made sacrifices and cared for them himself. He did not advise them to just read a book or watch Christian TV as an alternative to his personal involvement.

Paul compared himself also with a father. **Read 1 Thes 2:11-12.** His fatherly role was to exhort each of them, to encourage them, and to charge them to live in a manner worthy of God.

He shared himself with the community where he was teaching and preaching. How did he do this! I want to learn from him!

And Paul even worked night and day in order to not be a financial burden to the congregation or to anyone. He was earning his income as a tentmaker. Did the good man never sleep?

A last word about Church leadership; maybe this is an answer to the question how Paul could do all this. If you read the passage carefully, you see that Paul speaks the whole time about 'we speak', 'we teach', and 'we were gentle among you.'

Paul did not do the work alone; he had his partners Timothy and Silas with him. Church leadership is not a one-man show, but teamwork. Just as

here in our church we want to do the work that needs to be done together.

Wherever possible I love to involve all of you in what needs to be done for the sake of building our community and growing a healthy congregation under the Word of God. I would love it if you would let me know that you are interested in also playing such a role. We have enough to do!

After having said all these things about his own attitude toward the Word of God and his preaching, Paul now shifts the camera from himself to his congregation.

3 How the congregation responds to the Word

Read 1 Thes 2:13. The Word of God is central in the proclamation in the Church – but of course, it should also be central in the lives of those who listen to that proclamation. Paul made very clear what he expected from any healthy church, from any healthy Christian.

This is that you listen to the Word, that you receive it, that you do it. This is actually not very different from the duty of the preacher. Listen, receive, do.

Let us as followers of our Lord all attentively listen to his Word. This is more than once a week listening to a sermon of 15 minutes (hopefully not more).

Thanks to our friend Johannes Gutenberg who invented the printing process, we can all read our Bible at home. That is an excellent habit, each day, to read in your bible for a few minutes. One page.

Read it carefully. Consider what it means. Consider what it means for you. If you find that hard, come and talk with me – maybe I can help you a bit.

If you think that God never speaks to you, you should maybe listen more, and read more.

The Thessalonians did not only listen, they also received the Word of God. That is more than having a bible on the shelf. Even more than hearing or reading it every now and then. It means appropriating it for yourself. To receive it in its proper manner – accepting it not as a word from man, but to humbly accept it as God's speech to you, to us, and to allow it to impact you.

This sort of reception of the Word leads to actions. Paul recognized in the Thessalonians that the Word 'was at work in them'. It had impact. It changed their heart, their mind, yes their lifestyle.

Shall we agree to this mutual accountability? You hold me accountable for finding a better balance in my life, for studying the Word, for preaching it fully, for living it, for serving you with the Word. But I will hold you accountable for listening, reading, studying the Word and for living it. For finding your own balance in life.

There is not much difference actually. We all share the responsibility together as learners, students, and obedient listeners. The church of Jesus Christ is a learning community around the Word of God and this all begins with accepting it as Word of God for us, and then apply it in daily life.

Conclusion

His word is worth studying, preaching, teaching, and obeying. It is the word that God has entrusted to his Church. And you have it in your hand, the Word of God that directs your life and that transforms it. This Word will always be the centre of our Christian life as it is God, himself who speaks to us.

+ In the name of that God - Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen