

The Maternal Aspect of Godly Leadership

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9

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When you think of the apostle Paul, what comes to mind? Is it his bold faithfulness in the face of persecution? His bravery to preach the truth to any and every audience? His warrior-like passion for God's Word and His people?

You probably *don't* think about the *maternal* care he showed for the early church. But that's exactly what he emphasized in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9.

We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. 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. 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.

There is perhaps no more gentle, sensitive, tenderhearted relationship than that of "a nursing mother taking care of her own children" (v. 7). Unlike a nanny or babysitter tasked with the duty of caring for someone else's children, a mother has the most intimate personal connection with her own children. She is therefore more gentle, more affectionate, and more sensitive to the needs of her infant than any babysitter.

Paul's use of such imagery suggests a crucial lesson about spiritual leadership. Those whom God places in positions of responsibility in the church are not to approach the task with the indifference of a surrogate caretaker, but with the single-minded, wholehearted empathy of a mother.

No matter how many children a mother has, she loves them and cares for them as individuals. She has a special affection and concern for each child. Thus it should be in the church. Pastors and church leaders must see beyond the flock as a congregation and minister to the sheep as individuals.

There is no human relationship more self-giving and affectionate than that of a nursing mother toward her own infant. It is an illustration of personal care and loving self-devotion from someone in authority toward someone under authority.

At the same time it is an image utterly devoid of any force or dominion. The mother cradles the little one with great tenderness and affection, not with the grip of authority. She is not seeking honor from the child. On the contrary, she is willing to spend herself completely for the child's sake. Hers is a love that spares nothing.

This, Paul says, is a fitting emblem for spiritual leadership. The true leader must have qualities analogous to the tender, caring heart of a nursing mother. Overbearing autocrats who seem incapable of empathy or kindness are not fit leaders at all. The key to effective leadership has very little to do with wielding authority and much to do with giving oneself.

From that opening picture in verse 7, Paul proceeds to unfold the maternal aspect of leadership in verses 8 and 9. He underscores two ideas inherent in the nursing-mother analogy: affectionate desire and the sharing of oneself.

The affectionate desire of a mother for her child is the quintessential emotion of motherhood. Though it may seem inexplicable under a purely rational analysis, it is a natural, God-given aspect of the mother's relationship with her child. The mother with an infant in her arms has such a fond affection for her little one that she will go to amazing extremes of self-sacrifice and inconvenience to nurture and care for that child.

In a similar way, the faithful spiritual leader is driven by affectionate desire for those in his care. It is a yearning for their welfare, a zeal for their spiritual well-being, that motivates the leader to impart not only the gospel but also his very life (v. 8).

Again, that is precisely what the faithful mother does. She sets aside her life for the life of her beloved baby. She is sacrificial. She is utterly unselfish. She is generous. She is willing to give anything and everything for that little life. And the baby consumes her thoughts, her time, her energy—her very life.

Paul carries the parental metaphor into verse 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" (v. 9).

Like a devoted mother, he worked night and day for their benefit. He was no burden to them; indeed, he gladly bore the full burden of the ministry in Thessalonica—even to the extent of supporting himself financially on the side, so that no one could possibly think he had made himself their spiritual leader with the motive of getting something out of the relationship for himself.

Paul was evidently in Thessalonica only for a very short time, and he was more or less run out of town by the enemies of the gospel. The leaders in the synagogue there began to accuse him and try to foment violence against Paul and his traveling companions. So the Christians in that fledgling

church had to send Paul away by night to Berea (Acts 17:10).

Nevertheless, during his brief time there, Paul founded that church and formed lasting, affectionate relationships with the people whom he had brought to Christ. In fact, the intimacy of the nursing-mother analogy is all the more remarkable in light of how quickly Paul's ministry among those people ended. If we take Luke's account at face value, Paul's first visit to Thessalonica lasted only a few weeks at most. But the believers in that city knew very well that Paul had sacrificed everything for the sake of bringing them the gospel.

Moreover, during the time he was with them, Paul supported himself financially. Acts 18:3 says he was a tent-maker by trade, so evidently during those weeks in Thessalonica, he was able to earn money by hiring his services out to a tent-making business in Thessalonica. He literally worked day and night so that he could bring the gospel to the Thessalonians free of charge.

That is the maternal spirit. That's what a godly mother does, working day and night for the sake of her infant and never taking anything from the infant in return.

That is also the temperament of a godly spiritual leader—willing to labor long hours for the sake of his people in order to keep them receiving the life-giving truth of the gospel and the nourishment of God's Word. It is a life of sacrifice and self-giving, carrying the load for others, ministering to their needs with tenderness, gentleness, and long-suffering.

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