

Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermons series titled, □ “Living Like He’s Coming.” It is based on a study through the New Testament letter of 1 Thessalonians.

The text we’re studying today is □ 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12. From this text, we are going to learn about a biblical model of leadership that can help us to become better leaders.

This is relevant because chances are you are a leader, even if you don’t think of yourself as one. If you are in a position to influence others, you are a leader. Leaders include supervisors, class officers, older siblings, parents, grandparents, life group leaders, teachers, upperclassmen, team captains, husbands, wives, board members, bloggers, mentors, advisors, and friends who decide things for other friends.

So, the question is not so much whether or not you’re a leader. The question is what kind of leader will you be? How well will you lead?

And that leads to a related question: What will be the yardstick or model by which our leadership is measured? Who or what determines what constitutes a good leader?

We can look to our culture for models.

Or we can look to Scripture.

And the two sources could hardly be more different. In the sermon today, I want to contrast some cultural notions of good leadership with scriptural ideas that we will find in our text for today.

You may recall that, when the apostle Paul first arrived in Thessalonica, he went to the synagogue and argued that Jesus Christ is the Jewish Messiah, the King of the Jews and the Savior of the world. Many believed in Jesus and a church began.

But some of the Jews were unpersuaded and deeply offended at the blasphemous notion that Jesus is the Messiah. They mobilized a mob against Paul, falsely accusing him of treason and otherwise trying to discredit his person and claims. Concerned for the lives of Paul and his partners, the new believers in the Thessalonian church sent them away by night to Berea.

Within just a few months of leaving Thessalonica, Paul writes a letter to the people in the church there. It's the letter we are now studying, First Thessalonians.

In our text for today, Paul is writing on behalf of himself and his ministry partners, defending their leadership against the antagonists who are attempting to discredit Paul and draw the new believers in Thessalonica away from the faith. It is Paul's description of their leadership that provides us with a scriptural model.

It is not comprehensive; it doesn't tell us everything there is to know about leadership. But it is, nevertheless, profoundly helpful. And countercultural.

Here's the big, overarching idea I draw from the text: □ Lead selflessly. Lead in an unselfish, sacrificial, others-oriented way.

I realize that this idea is rather nebulous by itself. But after we're done working through the text, we will have a much better idea of what this means and how we can apply it to our lives today.

As part of the sermon, we are going to be building a □ leadership ledger with two columns. On the left, we have common **cultural** leadership principles. On the right, we have corresponding **scriptural** leadership principles.

For example, one common cultural leadership principle is: □ Impress with words. That is to say, a good leader should convey charisma, speak eloquently, be persuasive, present a convincing case, have a compelling public persona.

The contrasting scriptural principle from our text is: □ Impart your life. That is to say, you should share yourself, not just your words. Reveal the character behind your words. Walk what you talk. Put your money where your mouth is. Demonstrate integrity.

I get this from several verses. For example, in □ 1 Thessalonians 2:1, Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:1 For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain.

The phrase “not in vain” literally means “not empty.” It raises the question: What was not empty?

It is possible that Paul may be referring to productivity. If so, Paul would be saying that their coming was not empty of results. That is to say, it was effective.

I suspect, however, that Paul is not referring to productivity at all. Rather, I think he is referring to character. Paul is saying that their coming was not empty of character. They did not show up as empty suits with an empty message. Instead, there was substance behind their words.

This is corroborated in □ verse 8, where Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:8 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.

Notice they gave not only the gospel but also their own selves. As proof of their love, they imparted their lives, not just their words.

In □ verse 9, Paul gives an example.

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:9 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.

So as not to burden to the Thessalonians, Paul and his partners worked long hours in secular jobs so that they could proclaim the gospel free of charge. Their behavior gave weight to their words.

Also, in □ verse 10, Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:10 You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers.

Their conduct confirmed their claims. They didn't just try to impress with words; they imparted their lives.

Jesus himself modeled this leadership principle. He could have just impressed us with his words, saying how much he loves us. But he backed up his words by imparting his life.

Scriptural leadership is not just telling people how to do life; it is also about sharing your life. One of the greatest gifts my earthly father gave me was doing life together with me, working in the yard and at his gas station and on a pit crew. It allowed me not just to hear what was important to him; I got to see what was important by the way he lived.

In cultural leadership, you impress with words; in scriptural leadership, you impart your life.

Another common cultural leadership principle is: ☐ Enjoy privileges. Culture says that, as a good leader, you should take advantage of the perks. Claim your entitlements. Be the big dog who gets to eat first and lie down anywhere and anytime he wants.

The contrasting scriptural principle from our text is: ☐ Bear pain. If you want to be a leader, be a hard-working shepherd of your people. Sacrifice for their well-being. Take pains to protect and promote their best interests.

I get this from ☐ verse 2, where Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:2 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.

Back in Philippi, Paul and his partners had been dragged before city magistrates, falsely accused of anti-Roman behavior, brutally beaten with rods, and imprisoned in stocks for 24 hours. Then in Thessalonica, they again experienced opposition and threats to their own lives.

They were willing to boldly bear such pain because it was in the best interests of the people in Thessalonica. They wanted to declare to them

the gospel because it is the greatest news of the greatest gift ever—that Jesus Christ died and rose again in payment for our sins so that he can offer eternal life to all who will simply believe in him for it.

Scriptural leadership is painful. Good leaders agonize over the welfare of their people. In 2 Corinthians 11:28, Paul says, “I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches” (NLT).

Scriptural leadership is almost never the path of least resistance. Good parenting is painful. Healthy discipline is hard. Speaking the truth in love can be a pain. Leading where followers need to go but don’t want to go is painful.

As God incarnate, Jesus could have focused on enjoying all his privileges. Instead, he endured pain for you and me.

In cultural leadership, you enjoy privileges; in scriptural leadership, you bear pain.

Another common cultural leadership principle is: □ Dress up your hidden agenda. Sometimes you’ve got to schmooze people. Butter them up. Spin and manipulate to get what you really want. When you want something from someone, make it sound like you’re doing them a favor.

The contrasting scriptural principle from our text is: □ Take down your mask. Don’t give a false impression. Don’t mislead people. Don’t give false reasons for doing things.

I get this from a couple of verses.

In □ verse 3, Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:3 For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive,

Similarly, in □ verse 5, Paul adds,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:5 For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness.

A pretext is a false reason. When a little boy says he wants to stay home from school because he doesn't feel well, but he really wants to stay home to avoid a test, he's using sickness as a pretext for staying home.

Here's a shocker. Some religious charlatans use ministry as a pretext for greed.

Greed is commonly associated with money, but it need not be limited to that. It includes wanting more of almost anything, including money, power, position, and prestige.

Sometimes we parents push our children to excel academically or athletically. Our pretext for pushing them is that it's for their own good. It will prepare them for college and for life. Nevertheless, sometimes our underlying motivation is to vicariously experience more success through them, and to enjoy the appearance of being a good parent with a gifted child. Pushing our children can be a kind of pretext for greed if we're not careful.

In cultural leadership, you dress up your hidden agenda; in scriptural leadership, you take down your mask.

Another common cultural leadership principle is: □ Pump up your popularity. Get your followers to like you. Focus on pleasing your tribe. Above all, win the approval of your team.

The contrasting scriptural principle from our text is: □ Bown down to the Lord. Make the Lord's will your primary concern. Play to an audience of one. Seek first what is right before God.

I get this from □ verse 4, where Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:4 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.

Notice Paul views their leadership position as something God has entrusted to them; therefore, they are ultimately accountable to God for what they do and say. So, they want to please God, not people.

That is not to say that they set out to displease or offend people. And it is not to say that pleasing people is a bad thing. It is simply not their number one priority, nor should it be ours.

If your top priority is to please people, sooner or later, you're going to run into problems. In Galatians 1:10, Paul warns, "If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ's servant."

In cultural leadership, you pump up your popularity; in scriptural leadership, you bow down to the Lord.

Another common and related cultural leadership principle is: □ Polish up your image. Don't reveal your weaknesses. Make sure you are viewed in the best possible light. Build up your image.

The contrasting scriptural principle from our text is: ☐ Play down yourself. Be humble. Confess your weaknesses. Be vulnerable.

I get this from the first part of ☐ verse 6, where Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:6 Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, . . .

Paul is saying that they weren't really interested in polishing up their image in the eyes of other people. This attitude is reflected elsewhere. For example, in 1 Corinthians 4:3, Paul says, "As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point" (NLT).

Also, in 1 Timothy 1:15, Paul says, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (NLT).

In cultural leadership, you polish up your image; in scriptural leadership, you play down yourself.

Another common cultural leadership principle is: ☐ Tighten the reins. You've got to show 'em who's boss. Assert your authority. Gain control

The contrasting scriptural principle from our text is: ☐ Get down off your high horse. Don't abuse your authority. Use power sparingly, strategically, and humbly.

I get this from the last part of ☐ verse 6, where Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:6 . . . though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.

As an apostle, Paul could have thrown his weight around. He could have asserted his authority. He could have been demanding. But he wasn't.

Ever worked for a boss who's a controller? Ever worked for a supervisor who loves to wield power? Ever worked for a highly authoritarian, autocratic boss? It's not fun. Sometimes, it's downright demeaning.

Often people in authority who like to tighten the reins are very insecure. They think that by exercising power and asserting authority, they somehow preserve their higher position—they maintain the upper hand.

But Jesus models humility and restraint. He surrendered his right to use power to his own selfish advantage. Instead, he used his power to serve others.

In cultural leadership, you tighten the reins; in scriptural leadership, you get down off your high horse.

Another common cultural leadership principle is: □ Keep your distance. Don't get too close. You're the boss, not a friend. Don't make it too hard to fire somebody.

The contrasting scriptural principle from our text is: □ Get in the middle. Be involved. Be close—close enough to know and be known.

I get this from □ verse 7, where Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:7 But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

The phrase “among you” means “in the middle of you,” not at a distance. And the imagery of a nursing mother gently taking care of her

own children conveys the provision of needs with warmth and closeness.

That same closeness is conveyed by Jesus in John 10:14 when he says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me” (ESV). Jesus came down to be with his sheep—to know them and to be known by them.

In cultural leadership, you keep your distance; in scriptural leadership, you get in the middle.

Another common cultural leadership principle is: □ Always treat everyone alike. Lead everybody in the same way. Be consistent in every circumstance with every person. Make sure rewards and requirements are uniform.

The contrasting scriptural principle from our text is: □ Adapt to each one. Recognize that fairness does not always mean sameness. Customize your approach to fit each person. Focus on what each person needs in a particular moment.

I get this from □ verses 11 and 12, where Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:11 For you know how, like a father with his children, 12 we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you . . .

By word order in the original Greek, the phrase □ “each one” is emphasized, with a view to leading individuals, not just a group.

Paul mentions □ three things done for individuals: exhorting, encouraging, and charging. These are different ways of leading.

To exhort is to call to one's side to inspire.

To encourage is to come close to someone's side to comfort and support.

To charge is more authoritative. It is to demand or insist.

The idea is not that Paul exhorted, encouraged, and charged everyone at the same time in the same way. He adapted according to the needs of the person and the moment. He didn't always treat everyone alike.

This is not favoritism. It is simply understanding that people are different and need different things at different times.

Jesus also models this kind of adaptive leadership.

In Matthew 4:19, Jesus **exhorts** Peter, saying, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Then later in Matthew 16:23, Jesus **charges** Peter, saying, "Get behind me Satan!"

Still later in John 21:12, after Peter denies him, Jesus **encourages** Peter, saying, "Come and have breakfast."

Also, Jesus spent more time with some disciples than others. He changed the name of some disciples, but not others. Jesus healed some who were ill, but not others.

In cultural leadership, you always treat everyone alike; in scriptural leadership, you adapt to each one.

Finally, another common cultural leadership principle is: □ Wield power. Assert your authority. Give commands. Tell people what to do.

The contrasting scriptural principle from our text is: □ Empower. Equip people to do their work. Train them. Educate them. Connect them with the resources they need.

I get this from □ verse 12, where Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:12 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.

I want you to notice the purpose of exhorting, encouraging, and charging. It is □ “to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”

Notice what Paul did not say. He did not say, “to walk in a manner worthy of those of us who are telling you what to do.”

The focus is on ushering people into a relationship with God. A relationship in which they can discover for themselves what is worthy of God and how to live that out—a relationship in which they can discover for themselves how God is calling them.

Paul wanted to equip and empower the Thessalonian believers to do what every believing parent wants their children to do: to walk worthily on their own, to do the work God is calling them to do on their own. Last week, we saw that Paul was giving thanks to God for the Thessalonians precisely because they were walking worthily and fulfilling their calling on their own, even when Paul and his partners were no longer there to hold their hand.

Jesus also modeled delegation and empowerment. Think about this for moment. Jesus came and did what only he could do: He died on the cross in payment for our sin. But he delegates most of the rest to us.

Why didn't Jesus just stick around after the resurrection to evangelize, teach, and disciple everybody. He could have done a far better job than we're doing because he has the power.

But instead of wielding the power himself, Jesus delegates to us and empowers us to do his work. Why? It is because **we** benefit from doing his work. **We** are enriched by partnering with him.

In cultural leadership, you wield power; in scriptural leadership, you empower.

Having worked our way through the text, we can now stand back and understand more fully what the □ big idea really means in contrast to cultural thinking.

The big idea, lead selflessly means impart your life, bear pain, take down your mask, bow down to the Lord, play down yourself, get down off your high horse, get in the middle, adapt to each one, and empower.

When you think about how to apply all this, the list can seem overwhelming and, in some cases, the principles are overlapping. So, here's a suggestion to simplify the application. These suggestions are reflected on the back of your sermon notes, both in the suggested daily prayer and on the reflection and application for Friday.

1. Find a time and place where you can be alone.
2. Then prayerfully ask the Lord to bring to mind one person or group you may need to lead more selflessly.

3. Then prayerfully consider how you can lead them better in light of the principles in our text. The ledger we built is shown on the back side of your sermon notes for your review.
4. Then ask the Lord to help you follow through with what comes to mind.

If this process doesn't bring clear direction right away, don't worry. That's normal. Sometimes things come to mind right away; other times it may take days.

When I try to apply a scriptural principle, sometimes the Spirit brings a plan to mind in advance. Other times, I wait and wait, and then, all of sudden I find myself smack dab in a situation where I get a nudge and think to myself this is it, this is the person, this is what I need to do in this moment.

Prayerfully wait on the Lord to guide you.

Leading selflessly is a countercultural way that we can bring the life of Jesus to our world.

Let's pray. Make this prayer your own. Lord, bring to mind one person or group I may need to lead more selflessly. How can I lead them better? Help me to follow where you lead. Amen.

Today we have an opportunity to commemorate the person and work of the most selfless leader of all time. We are going to observe communion.

By his death and resurrection in payment for our sins, Jesus Christ alone offers us the free gift of eternal life. We receive the gift through faith alone in Christ alone with no other strings attached to earn or to keep or to prove our new life in Jesus.

Communion commemorates the fact that Jesus, our leader, imparted his life, he bore the pain, he played down himself, he got in the middle so that we might have new life—that we could be so empowered.

On the two identically prepared tables in the front, there are two elements: the bread and the cup. The bread represents Christ's body given for us on the cross. The cup represents Christ's blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

When we take the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim our belief in the person and work of Jesus Christ for us.

I am going to pray. Then some music will play. Any time during the music, you may come forward to partake of the elements. You may partake immediately at the table. Or you may take the elements back to your seat and partake there. It doesn't matter.

If for any reason you would like me to serve you the elements right where you are seated, that would be my privilege. Just raise your hand and I will find my way to you.

There is no pressure to participate. If you are uncomfortable, feel free to sit this one out.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you for dying in our place and on our behalf that we may have new life with you. We are the undeserving beneficiaries of your selfless leadership. And we are grateful. In this moment, draw us closer to you. Amen.

[Announce VBS information meeting in the auditorium in about 5 minutes.]