

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12  
Approved and Entrusted with the Gospel  
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell  
8-9-15

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Wemmicks are little wooden people who live in the town below the woodcarver's house. Each Wemmick was different. Some were tall, others were short, some had big noses others had big eyes, some wore hats, others wore wool coats, but all were made by the same woodcarver. Each Wemmick carried with them two little boxes, one that has gold star stickers, the other has gray dot stickers. All day long they go around giving one another stars or dots. There are some Wemmicks who have smooth wood or nice paint got stars, others with rough paint got dots. Some Wemmicks could carry heavy things, these Wemmicks get lots of gold stars. Punchinello couldn't lift heavy things and his paint wasn't very nice, Wemmicks like him got lots of gray dots. Wemmicks are very concerned about what other Wemmicks think of them, and they spend a lot of time trying to accumulate gold stars and avoid gray dots. Punchinello the Wemmick was covered in gray dots, he had so many gray dots he didn't want to go outside.

Max Lucado tells this modern day fable of Punchinello in his children's book *You Are Special*, in which he emphasizes the point that we as people spend far too much time worrying about what others think of us.

This morning, we are continuing in a series of messages in which we are looking at the first letter the Apostle Paul wrote to a group of Christians in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica. Last week, we looked at his greeting where he praises the people for their work of faith, their labor of love, and their steadfastness of hope.

Now before we begin, I am going to do something a little different. I am going to give you the claim of the sermon at the beginning—then I will unpack what I mean. Here goes: if you try to follow Jesus in the world it will be difficult, because you will face opposition. Every person who endeavors to follow Jesus will face opposition and will tempt you to give up. God's way for your life is the best possible way, and there will always be someone or something that tries to keep you from that. You are God's instrument and there will always be something in the way of that instrument being used to sound God's good news.

But if we will walk through opposition and grow in faith, hope, and love, we will be God's instrument in the midst of challenging circumstances—that is why we are here today, so that we can grow strong in this way.

So if you would, reach for your Bibles and turn with me to 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 and let's look at the text together.

**You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of**

**God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.**

I want to stop there for a moment, because I want us to be clear about what Paul presents because this is a powerful message. Paul begins by telling us that his message came to them in the midst of much opposition. Paul had a history with the Thessalonians, they knew about his experience in Philippi before traveling to Thessalonica.

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas and Timothy traveled to the city of Philippi where they met a woman who was a maker and dealer of purple cloth—the most valuable cloth of all—her name was Lydia. Lydia became the first Christian convert in the city of Philippi and because she was very wealthy, it's likely that she single-handedly funded that church.

And it says that Lydia and her entire family was baptized by Paul and began following Jesus. Almost immediately after their success there, the text says that as they were going to the place of prayer, the synagogue, they met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination (she was overcome by a spirit that was not her own). The text says that she was the property of some people who exploited her condition for **much gain** in telling fortunes. As an aside, it is so deeply disturbing that there are people who take advantage of others conditions to make money. It's sick.

And what Paul says when he sees this is: “this is wrong.” When we as Christians see someone who is being taken advantage of and are powerless to change it, we should stand up and say the very same thing, “this is wrong.” Paul releases her, he says to the evil spirit within her, “in the name of Jesus Christ come out of her.” But when it comes out, these evil men no longer have a way to exploit her for money, so they bring Paul and the others before the rulers who accused them, beat them, and threw them in jail. By standing up and sharing the good news that they had heard, literally releasing others from bondage, Paul and Silas and Timothy are thrown into prison—all for just doing what a follower of Jesus does.

So Paul begins his instructions to the Thessalonians by reminding them what happened to him in Philippi, because whenever a person begins to follow Jesus closely and make changes in their lives, they will always and necessarily face opposition. Whether you are trying to follow Jesus for the first time, or you're trying to be a faithful witness by being a good employee at the school or business where you work, or you're trying to be a good and devoted husband or wife to your family, a kind and strong parent to your children, Paul wants us to know that anytime we seek to serve God we will always face opposition.

Experiencing Opposition When Following Jesus

1. Opposition will come from outside of yourself (someone will make it difficult for you to follow Jesus)
2. It will come as a result of you wanting to serve Jesus
3. It will come from the action of another trying to hinder you from following Jesus
4. When that opposition gets severe, it will make you want to give up

What we learn as we look at Paul and Silas and Timothy's experience in jail is that whenever a person begins to follow Jesus, intentionally and with purpose and dedication, there will be people around them who try to resist them. When I as a parent decide I want to be a patient and disciplined parent with my 2 and 4 year old, I find that they have unimagined storehouses of resistance in them. When things get hard, we are not meant to give up; we are meant to press on as we grow in love and in faith.

But Paul doesn't just say that difficulties in following Jesus will come from the outside, did you know that they will come from the inside, too? Later this afternoon, if you want to look up Romans chapter 7, you will read Paul saying this: **I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.** It is as if there is a dead man inside of me and every time I want to do the right thing, he reanimates and keeps me from the good things I want. **For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.**

Has anyone else felt this opposition, the kind that comes from within? How do we make it through this kind of opposition? The answer, I think, is in these verses. In verse 4, Paul says that **we speak not to please mortals, but to please God. We never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed, but we were gentle among you like a nurse tenderly caring for her children.**

Do you see what Paul is telling them here? Paul will always face the temptation to say things that are pleasing and flattering to his hearers. Have you ever been around a people pleaser, or are you yourself a people pleaser? Paul says something very important here, because each and every one of us will face a situation in which we have to speak on behalf of God, not just the preacher, but every one of us. And every one of us will have to make a decision: will we speak so as to flatter and impress our peers, other men and women? Or will we decide to speak in a way that is pleasing to God? This, Paul says, is the distinction he makes for a woman who faces opposition the way God wants her to.

Do you know that sometimes the thing that needs to be said is also the hardest? If you have a family member who is struggling with alcohol and you see that person slipping back and beginning to spiral down, the right thing to do is to say the hard thing. If you have a daughter who is in a destructive and abusive relationship, you know the right thing to do is to tell her to get out. But it's hard, isn't it? Flattery is a dangerous thing, because it goes down oh so easy, but in many cases it has no lasting value.

The alternative here is not to be someone who pleases others, but one who makes the conscious decision to please God.

This is what happens when we have to confront opposition from the outside. When we make the conscious decision to follow God, we will face opposition and be called upon to confront opposition. But what happens inside us when we make that conscious decision to follow God? Because sometimes when we choose to follow God, we start to try and acquire lots of gold stars like the Wemmicks.

Paul understood this because this is where he came from. As a man who was what's called a Pharisee, Paul was a part of the Jewish society that was very conscious about earning gold stars. They sought to follow the Law of Moses so closely that they began to divide into their own community of super followers. Paul became a Pharisee of Pharisees, that is, until one day on the road to Damascus he met Jesus. Jesus said, "Give it up. Stop trying so hard." And the news that sent him around the world was that Jesus already loves him, he has already redeemed him, he has already given him everything that he could ever need, so stop trying to earn it. Jesus Christ has already chosen to take pleasure in you. That's who Jesus is, he is God's embodied pleasure with humanity.

You no longer need to worry about or try and earn God's pleasure. You no longer have to fear for your mistakes or worry that what you've done is not enough. You no longer have to worry about what others think or what others say about you, or the gold stars you receive from them. What Paul had the courage and strength to bring to the Thessalonians was what he in verse 2 calls the **Gospel of God**, not a message of his own devising, but the very good news of Jesus Christ crucified and risen for you. It is as if Paul leans in and holds his head and says, *I could not think this up, for this is not from within me, but it is the very grace and truth of Jesus Christ God's Son for you, and all you have to do is live into that pleasure.*

I want to close by returning to the story of Punchinello the Wemmick. One day Punchinello met a starless and dotless Wemmick, named Lucia. "How do you do it?" he asked. "How is it that the stars and dots just fall off you?" "Each day I go to see Eli the woodcarver, and spend time with him in his woodshop. Why don't you try it?"

Punchinello walked up the narrow path to the top of the hill and stepped into the big Woodcarver Shop. His little wooden eyes widened at the size of everything. The stool was as tall as he was. He had to stretch on his tippy-toes to see the top of the workbench. A hammer was as long as his arm. Punchinello swallowed hard and thought to himself, "I'm not staying here!" and he turned to leave. Then he heard his name. "Punchinello?" said this voice, so deep and strong. Just then Punchinello stopped. The voice said, "Punchinello, oh how good it is of you to come! Let me have a look at you."

Punchinello slowly turned around and looked at the large bearded craftsman and said, "Sir, you know my name?" "Of course I do. I made you," Eli said. All of a sudden, Eli stooped down and picked little Punchinello up and set him on the workbench. "Hm-mm-mm," the Maker spoke thoughtfully as he inspected the gray circles all over him, "Looks like you've been given some bad marks." Punchinello explained, "Oh, Eli, I didn't mean to; really I didn't!!! I really tried hard not to." The Maker said, "Oh, you don't have to defend yourself to me, my child. I don't care what the other Wemmicks think." Punchinello asked, "Really? You don't?" Then Eli said, "No and you shouldn't either. Who are they to give stars or dots? They are Wemmicks just like you. What they think really doesn't matter at all, Punchinello. All that matters is what I think. And I think you are pretty special." Punchinello laughed, "Oh, me special? How can I be special? I can't walk fast. I can't jump. My paint is peeling. I make silly mistakes all the time and I am not a beautiful Wemmick like some of the others. How could I matter to you?" Eli looked at Punchinello and put his hands on those little wooden shoulders of his and spoke very slowly, "Because Punchinello... you are mine. That's why you matter to me." Punchinello

had never had anyone look at him like this before or say anything so nice, much less his Maker! He didn't know what to say!

"Punchinello, every day I've been waiting and hoping you would come to see me," Eli explained. Punchinello looked up at him and said, "I came because I met a sweet Wemmick girl who had no marks." Eli said, "I know. Lucia told me about you." So Punchinello asked, "Why don't the stickers stay on Lucia?" Eli said, "Because she has decided that what I think is more important than what anyone else thinks. The stickers only stick if you let them." Punchinello looked puzzled and said, "What?" Eli said, "Yes, the stickers only stick if they matter to you. The more you trust My love, the less you will care about those stickers." But Punchinello said, "I'm not sure I really understand. What you are saying?" The maker said, "You will, but it will take some time. You've got a lot of marks. So for now, just come to see me every day and let me remind you how much I care about you." Eli lifted Punchinello off the bench and set him on the floor. "Now remember," Eli said as the Wemmick walked out the door. "You ARE special because I made you, and I don't make mistakes."

Punchinello didn't stop, but in his heart he thought, "I think he really means it." And when he did, a dot fell to the ground.