

“Truth Without the Spin”

I Thessalonians 2:1-13

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If you are a follower of Jesus, one of the highest priorities is to help others believe in and follow Jesus. He sends us to share the Good News so that everyone can find their way back to God. Jeff Hill, an elder of Woodside, takes this calling very seriously. But Jeff does it in a way that would make you say, “Seriously?”

Jeff takes a spin class at LA Fitness at 5:45am. You heard right: 5:45 a.m. He met a woman named Marlene who hadn't been to church since childhood. After a while Marlene asked Jeff to join her racquetball group. Jeff declined since the last time he played racquetball he broke someone's nose. Yet Marlene was so persistent Jeff decided to make a bet with her - If he won the racquetball game, Marlene would have to come to a Woodside service one Sunday. And if Marlene won? Jeff would have to run in the Alex's Lemonade Stand 5k Run in Philadelphia wearing a yellow tutu!!! This seemed crazy but Jeff agreed to it because he knew there was no chance he would lose and besides, God was on his side.

Jeff played those two games with all his might. He was doing this for the Lord – and he did not want to wear that tutu! And he...got crushed! The games weren't even close. Jeff always pays his debts, so with the support of my wife Ellen, he ran the whole race in a yellow tutu. He did get a few whistles along the way.

The moral of the story? Don't bet when you share your faith, or you may wind up in a tutu.

In our message series “Thrive” we are discovering how to live the abundant life in spite of our challenges and circumstances. Jesus doesn't want us to just survive. We were

made to thrive! Last week we learned how the newborn believers in Thessalonica put their faith in the One True God instead of idols, how they put their hope in a God who is bigger than their burdens, how they shared the love of God with their neighbors.

So how did the Apostle Paul do such a good job in planting the seeds and helping them find their way back to God? Well he didn't make a bet and you can bet he didn't wear a tutu. He did wear chains in prison in Philippi. A riot in Thessalonica forced him to flee under cover of darkness. His critics from Thessalonica chased him to the next town, Berea, and stirred up trouble there as well (See Acts 16-17). Finally, far to the south in Athens, Paul was able to catch his breath and write a letter to the newborn congregation he planted up in Thessalonica. In chapter 2 we get a hint of the threats and attacks he faced. He writes,

You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives nor are we trying to trick you (I Thessalonians 2:1-3).

His critics in Thessalonica said, "Paul you're a failure, a liar, a manipulator, a deceiver, a con artist." Others charged that he won converts through "flattery" and that his sole purpose was to bilk funds from his poor deluded followers. They essentially said he was like a traveling politician who put a lot of spin on the "truth."

In this election year you hear a lot of "spin." Spin doctors try to control what the public thinks about their candidate. They spin, stretch, even twist the truth. No wonder we are so skeptical. These days we sift through so much false advertising it's hard to believe anyone is telling the truth. Here are some actual newspaper ads:

Braille dictionary for sale. Must see to appreciate.
Our experienced Mom will care for your child. Fenced yard, meals, and smacks included.
Girl wanted to assist magician in cutting-off-head illusion. Blue Cross and salary.

Man wanted to work in dynamite factory. Must be willing to travel.

We've also been fed some pretty clever lies. Do any of these sound familiar?

I promise to pay you back out of my next paycheck.
 The merger won't affect you. The company will remain the same.
 I'm a social drinker, and I can quit anytime I want to.
 You don't need it in writing. You have my personal guarantee.
 You can tell me. I won't breathe a word to a soul.
 And of course, the three biggest lies: I did it. I didn't do it. I can't remember.

It's no wonder friends and family are skeptical when we speak about the abundant eternal life Jesus freely gives. So how did Paul tell the Truth without spin to the Thessalonians?

First, he was **Convinced the Good News is God's News**. He writes,

We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe (I Thessalonians 2:13).

In our age of tolerance for all beliefs and cultures, it's common to hear friends say, "Well that's good for you and true for you. But not for me." Yet the Good News of abundant life in Jesus is not my idea or your idea or the Church's idea or even Paul's idea. It's God's idea. The Good News is God's News. If it is from God, then it's true for everyone. It cannot be only true for some people. Believing that the Good News is God's News doesn't require you to say that all other religions and philosophies are lies. On the other hand being tolerant does not mean you must accept all viewpoints as equally true. A Christian can acknowledge that there is truth in other faiths and still believe that Jesus is the Truth.

If a group of researchers suddenly discovered the cure for cancer, it would not be intolerant or offensive for them to share it with others. In fact, it would be insensitive and offensive if they kept it secret. God has announced the cure for the most contagious and deadly disease: sin. It poisons all relationships, ruins lives and separates us from God.

Through a gift of sheer grace, God provides a cure for sin that works 100% of the time. Why would anyone keep that to themselves? Penn Jillette, half of the magic team of Penn and Teller, can't understand why Christians keep silent. Even though he is a confirmed and convinced atheist, he does not respect those who are afraid to share the Good News with unbelievers. He calls it 'proselytizing.'

I've always said that I don't respect people who do not proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and you think that, uh, well, it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward—uh, how much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?

Are you convinced the Good News is God's News? Then it must be shared.

Second, Paul **Told All of God's News**. His top priority was to please God.

On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else. (I Thessalonians 2:4-6)

In our culture, it's common to soften or water down the message to please the public. But when it came to the Truth, Paul refused to use spin. He did not use flattery, tricks, half-truths or impure motives. He wasn't trying to get rich off the Gospel. In fact he worked making tents to support himself. Above all, Paul did not try to please anyone, not even the Thessalonians. He lived only to please God.

One of the greatest obstacles which prevents us from sharing the Good News is the fear of how people will react. And yet here's the irony: if people find out how pleased God is with them, they can get off the hamster wheel of people pleasing.

Hugh Jackman, who is famous for X-Men and Les Miserables, describes some of the deep wounds that still drive his life even years later. When he was eight-years-old his mother abandoned him, his father, and his four elder siblings. His father, Christopher,

seemed to compensate for the pain by working long hours as an accountant. Jackman said, "My father could only come to one sports game a year because he had five kids, and on Saturday he had to shop. If my father was there, it would be 50 percent greater. Having his approval is something that still drives me." Jackman admits his ongoing struggles with fear, anxiety, and people-pleasing.

I saw a play in Sydney, and in the notes they had this quote from Bono that said: "What kind of hole exists in the heart of a person when they need to have 70,000 people scream, 'I love you,' in order to feel fulfilled?" But there is a part of me that wants to please, to be all things to all people.¹

If we stop worrying about pleasing people, we can help more of them stop pleasing people and discover the love of God the Father who is pleased with them.

Third, Paul **Shared All of Himself with God's News**. I've found it true that people don't care what you know until they know you care. Paul proved from the Scriptures that Jesus had to suffer and rise from the dead (Acts 17:3). But he didn't just burden the Thessalonians with proofs. He didn't only give them the Gospel. He gave them his life.

As apostles of Christ, we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. (I Thessalonians 2:6-8)

To the Thessalonians, he was a gentle mother nursing and caring for his newborn believers. He was a loving father who encouraged, comforted and urged them to live lives worthy of God. He was a hard working brother who supported himself so as not to financially burden them. Paul and his fellow missionaries lived holy, righteous and blameless lives so no one could call them hypocrites. God did not send His Good News

¹ "Hugh Jackman on His Surprising Hollywood BFFs and Mother's Abandonment," The Hollywood Reporter (2-13-13)

to the world in a philosophical proof or a mystical vision from heaven. He didn't send an angel or a prophet. He came in person, in Jesus. And it's through believers who are both tolerant and devoted to the Truth, through believers who seek to please God and are willing to bear the burdens of others, through believers who love and share their lives, that the Good News of Jesus is spread in this world. This is why we encourage you to B.L.E.S.S. someone by:

- Beginning with Prayer for them
- Listening to them
- Eating with them
- Serving them
- Sharing your Story.

That's how to share your life with someone as you share the Good News. If you planted that seed paper this past week let those growing flowers remind you to BLESS someone with God's Good News.

This fall, Woodside will have an unparalleled opportunity to share what we believe with our community. Starting in September we will begin a series called "Believe." It's the follow up to The Story. I often hear two requests from people at Woodside: "Help me understand the Bible" and "Help me go deeper." The Story helped you understand the great story of God's great love for us and the extent He went to get us back. Now that you know the overall story of the Bible, the next step is to understand what we believe as followers of Jesus. The "Believe" series will help you to think, act, and be more like Jesus. It will help you, no matter where you are, to go deeper in your relationship with Jesus. You will be hearing more about it in the coming months. We will be doing "Believe" in many if not all our Growth Groups.

Yet today, I want to challenge you to pray about and consider sharing "Believe" with those you know who don't know Jesus. I ask you to begin praying now for those you

might invite to a Believe group. This is an incredible opportunity for you to share your life and God's Good News with those you know. Tell them the Truth without spin.

That's exactly what Jeff Hill did. Remember how he tried to invite Marlene to come to Woodside and wound up wearing a yellow tutu? Well Jeff didn't give up. Just before we started the New Testament part of The Story last fall, Jeff had an idea. He would share the Truth with his Spin...class.

Three years ago I started taking a spin classes at LA Fitness which starts at 5:45am. There are approximately forty members in the class. After a while you get to see the same people. As a result, I have gotten to know many of them pretty well, but *not* spiritually!

Well, this past August I decided to make a fairly risky and bold move (at least for me) and ask some of them if they wanted to start a bible study. I explained how our church just recently finished the Old Testament in a book called "The Story" and we are about to start the New Testament. I think a few of them looked at me wide eyed and thought this might be a little crazy. But after all I'm a little crazy so this is nothing new! One member thought it was a good idea and proceeded to ask the spin instructor if she wanted to join us – and to my surprise – she did!

Now the only time we could make it work for everyone's schedule is Thursday at 4:55 am. Our meeting place was the parking lot at Oxford Valley Mall in front of JC Penny's. Kathy Carter, the spin instructor, brought her van so we could watch the video on two screens. Picture 6 to 7 people piling into Kathy's van every Thursday morning at 4:55am. The plan was to watch the video, then jump out of the van to walk/run around the outside of the mall. During the run we would discuss what we just read and saw on the video. Then we had to race to LA Fitness in time for the 5:45am spin class.

I will never forget how awkward I felt watching the first video with all these people in the van. I definitely did not know their faith. So I just said to myself, "Lord, Thy will be done"! To my surprise the bible study proceeded to the next week and then the next and so on until we finished the study. And when we were done, they asked, "What are we doing next?" Since then we've watched an Andy Stanley video and now we are doing the Alpha course.

My message is: how do you know the person next to you wouldn't want to go to a Bible study just like you were asked to once?

I challenge you to do what Jeff did: to invite friends you know who don't know Jesus to attend the Believe series. You don't have to do it in a tutu. You just have to say, "Here I am Lord, send me too."