

1 Thessalonians 2 (5) – God is Witness

The Apostle Paul had made many converts while he was in Thessalonica. And even after he had left, many more people were coming to Christ because of the new church at Thessalonica. It was a wonderful thing.

But there was a lot of opposition to Paul and his message. The unbelieving religious leaders wanted to stop the spread of the Gospel. They didn't want their whole way of life to be upset, especially by someone who used to be one of them. And the political folks wanted to stop the spread of the church. They didn't want their whole way of life to be upset, either. They were afraid of Roman reprisal because the church was talking about King Jesus as Lord instead of the Roman Caesar as Lord.

Still, the church at Thessalonica was thriving. They were growing in number, and the members were growing in the grace of God. As Paul was telling the Thessalonians in chapter 1, the new church and its new converts had been doing a great thing. The message was spreading, despite the persecution. All of Greece had come to hear about Jesus Christ.

So, what were the opponents of Paul going to do? The more they attacked the church, the stronger the church seemed to get. So, the new strategy of Paul's opponents was to spread lies about Paul. If they were having trouble stopping the message, maybe they could discredit the message by discrediting the messenger. They said, "How could this message be true when this messenger is so false?" That kind of strategy continues today.

Paul was being accused of teaching falsehood and heresy. Paul's opponents said that Paul was wandering from the truth of the Old Testament. And they said he was using his message to manipulate people so as to satisfy his sinful passions. But as we saw in our previous message on this passage, Paul wasn't wandering off God's path. He wasn't attempting to deceive people. He wasn't trying to satisfy sinful passions. He was committed to God's truth. And his motive was to please God.

Now, in vs.5, Paul continues to defend his methods. And this is important. Because in this verse, Paul shows you how false teachers often operate. And how you can learn to discern between false teachers and true teachers. Also, how you can learn to discern, in other words, to understand, when your motives aren't as pure as you think they are, or want them to be.

Learning the difference between what's true and false, and who's true and false, this is a vital and valuable skill. And it is an ongoing need in your life. Not just to test the teachers. But to test your own heart. Because guarding your heart is how you keep from falling for the false (Proverbs 4:23). Whether that is listening to false teachers. Or being captured by false teaching. Or dealing with the lies people tell you, or tell about you.

Sometimes it's simple. Because you know God's word, and someone or some teaching is obviously against God's word, or twisting God's word, or making up stuff that's not in God's word. Of course, you can always be growing in your understanding of God's word. And it's always good to compare what people say in the name of God to the word of God.

Sometimes it's not so simple. Because your own heart is deceived. And so, you fall for the false, because the false is what your heart really wants. And it seems so good, so right, so helpful, and it's so popular. And deceived people will fall for a lot of things if someone just uses a few Bible verses. But remember, the Devil uses a lot of Bible verses. In 2 Timothy 4:3-4, Paul said – *For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.*

The Bible spends a lot of time telling you about the error, falsehood, and lies in the world, in the church, and in your heart. So, if you want to follow the Bible, you can't just "focus on the positive." That would be fun, but that would be false. Because the Bible never tells you to do it that way. And because there is so much wrong, false, evil, and twisted coming your way that can seem positive. But it is leading you right into the Devil's ditch.

So, how can you know the difference? You keep asking God to reveal your heart, and keep changing your heart to be more like Jesus. You keep looking at Jesus until you get humble. And then you keep looking at Jesus so you stay humble. You keep reading God's word. You keep praying. You stay in fellowship with God's people. And you keep a short account with sin.

It has been said that you can't know the motives of someone's heart. But God does. Hebrews 4:12-13 says – *For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.* 1 Kings 8:39 says – *for you, you only, know the hearts of all ...mankind.* Psalm 44:21 says – *God...knows the secrets of the heart.*

When it comes to false teachers and false teaching, there can be otherwise good, godly people who don't intend on giving false teaching, and whose motives aren't bad, but who teach the wrong thing unawares. And there are some who teach the truth, and yet they do it to satisfy their own selfish interests. You want to be involved with those who teach the truth, and grow in the truth, and who do that to please God, and mature his people.

Sometimes, you can simply observe someone's behavior and know they are motivated by greed or a lust for glory (see vs.6). But sometimes, it's not so obvious. 1 Timothy 5:24 says – *The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later.*

Discerning good teaching from bad teaching, good teachers from bad teachers, and good motives from bad motives requires time and commitment to God's word and God's people. It also requires time and commitment to overcome these sins of flattery, greed, and self-glory in yourself. The more you've battled these sins, the more you'll recognize them. If you want to please God, discern good from bad, and disciple others, you have to deal with these sins on the heart level. You learn to discern the false around you by learning to discern the false within you.

For we never came with words of flattery – Flattery is a form of manipulation. People love to hear good things about themselves, and saying a good thing with no intent other than to build them up for good, godly reasons, that's not flattery, that's faith building. Paul praised the Thessalonians in chapter 1 for how they responded to the message.

Flattery is the opposite of this; it's saying a good thing in order to get some personal benefit. It's not building up; it's buttering up. And the flatterer butters you up to swallow your substance in some way. You say something good to win someone to yourself for self-interest and personal gain. You may not even believe a word of what you say, you just want to get your way. And you'll say whatever it takes to get what you want. Proverbs 26:28 says – *A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.* Proverbs 29:5 says – *A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet.*

False teachers use the Bible to flatter people by twisting the word of God to promise people something that God has not promised, or to give them a false sense of assurance, blessing, or empowerment. This is not a true teacher building people's faith in God and God's word. It is a false teacher building people's faith in them and their word. In Acts 20:30, Paul said – *and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.* The false teacher becomes the dispenser of blessings, as long as you support them. And these teachers know how to keep people happily on their hook, hoping their guru's power will rub off on them.

as you know – The purpose of flattery is to gain power over people, a common tactic among religious charlatans. Paul says, you know we didn't do that, because you saw how we were, and God was watching (...*God is witness*).

It is good to build others up in the Lord. Romans 15:2 – *Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.* Ephesians 4:29 – *Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.* 1 Thessalonians 5:11 – *Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.*

Building people up can be through words, or deeds, and in prayers. And if you want to avoid speaking flattery, find the good, and stick to the truth. Realize that many people can detect flattery, and God is watching, and he hates flattery. Psalm 12:2-3 says – *Everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak. May the LORD cut off all flattering lips.* Ask God to help you see flattery from you, and to you. Ask God to help you process and purify your motives, and to stop you from taking advantage of vulnerable people. Especially when you are in a position of authority.

Psalm 141:3 says – *Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!* And it is more than just not saying what you shouldn't say. It is also a matter of changing how you think. Because the desire to flatter and be flattered starts in your heart. Psalm 19:14 says – *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.* You don't need flattery, you need faith.

For we never came...with a pretext for greed – False teachers want stuff. The word “pretext” means they hide their real intent, covering their greed with a spiritual cloak. It is so important for you to learn that false teachers use deception, not just bad doctrine. 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 – *For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.* They hide their heart with a veneer of virtue.

People say, “But oh, they do so much good work in the world,” or “Can't you see how happy the people are, and how passionately they worship God?” But they have been led into a ditch. And even the false teachers themselves can be blinded by the Devil's light. 2 Timothy 3:13 – *while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.*

Paul says he's not in the ministry for money. In Acts 20:33, he said – *I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.* And this covetousness, or greed, is about more than money. People can be greedy for glory, for fame, recognition,

power, prestige, position, and promotion. They desire that more than they desire God. 1 John 2:15-16 says – *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.*

It is good to enjoy God's good graces in your life. It isn't bad to be blessed. But it is bad when you make more of it than you ought, seeking it for bad reasons, and it blocks your view of God. 1 Timothy 6:17 – *As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.*

The same Greek root word that 1 Thessalonians 2:5 renders as "greed," Colossians 3:5 renders as "covetousness." *Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.* Covetousness is idolatry. It's when you want what someone else has, because your pride says you deserve it more than they do. Or any number of other, idolatrous thoughts that hide your own heart from you.

The bottom line about covetousness, and greed, which are manifestations of idolatry, is that your heart desires something more than God. And your mind thinks you need certain stuff more than you need truth and godliness. So, your thoughts and desires are out of order. And what you need to do is to ask God to reveal your heart, and change your heart. Psalm 139:23-24 says – *Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!*

Live like God is your witness. Is your life a witness to God? Even when no one else is watching? Because God always is.

God is witness. Paul was saying that God would hold him accountable if he was lying about his message, his method, or his motives. No matter how hard you try and hide, you can't hide your heart from God. But you can change your course today. Turn around; God's been waiting for you.