

Clarity and Comfort

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15 ESV)

The Evidence of a Faithful Ministry

September 6th 2020

1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians 2.

I mentioned last week that the church in Thessalonica was a young church. We don't know exactly how long Paul was able to minister to them before being chased out of town, but it was likely no more than six months. Can you imagine if you had only been a Christian for six months when, all of the sudden, your pastor was chased out of town by an angry mob?

And it gets worse! That angry mob didn't exactly cheer up when Paul left town. They wouldn't be content until this new Christian movement was snuffed out in their city.

These troublemakers knew that the easiest way to bring this young church to its knees was to assassinate the character of its founder. As Paul goes, so goes the church. If they could prove that Paul was a crook, then his followers would quickly scatter.

Now, we don't have many travelling teachers in our culture, but they were not uncommon in the first century. Sophisticated, well-spoken men would glide into town and they would attempt to amass a following for themselves. They would stay for as long as the gig was comfortable, and then they would move on to the next city. By all accounts, it appears that these opponents pointed at the Apostle Paul and said: "He's no different than the rest of them!"

And, to be fair, Paul's exit from Thessalonica didn't help his case. We heard about that last week. In Acts 17, we read about how a mob came searching for Paul and Silas. They couldn't find them so instead they hauled a Christian leader named Jason and some of the other members of the church before the city officials. That night things started to get dangerous for the Christians in Thessalonica and the church snuck Paul and Silas out of town. This midnight retreat gave Paul's opponents some dangerous ammunition. You can imagine what they were saying.

“See! Paul never cared about any of you! At the first sign of danger he high-tailed it out of here! You're going to believe THAT guy?? He's just another self-interested peddler.”

When we consider this situation as a whole, it ought to serve as a warning for us. When the enemy wants to attack the people of God, he often begins by sowing distrust into the congregation. As it is said by the prophets:

Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered; (Zechariah 13:7b ESV)

We should be mindful of that attack. The enemy would have us distrust our leaders.

This passage should also serve as a warning to those of us who would lead; whether in the congregation, in the community or in your own home. The enemy is going to sow distrust. That's bound to happen. The question is: Will the accusations stick? We're going to learn in this passage that the life of the messenger matters. Paul withstood this barrage of accusations because he lived a life that was above reproach.

Paul's opponents thought that his ministry was an example of cheap peddling, but we know better and so too did the church in Thessalonica. Paul's ministry was an example of faithfulness, and it is one that we would do well to follow. As we walk through this chapter, we're going to uncover the evidence of a faithful ministry.

The Evidence of a Faithful Ministry

Rather than reading the whole text at once, we're going to move through the text at a slower pace. Look with me now at 1 Thessalonians 2. We'll begin with verses 1-2:

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

In these first two verses, we learn that a faithful ministry is bold in the face of opposition.

1. It is bold in the face of opposition

When Paul's opponents heard about his midnight exit from the city, they thought for sure that it was proof of his cowardice. However, these accusers didn't know the rest of the story. They didn't realize that the man they were calling a coward was actually the most courageous man who had ever graced the streets of their city.

But the church knew this. They knew that, before Paul began his ministry in Thessalonica, he had been ministering in Philippi. You can read about that story in Acts 16. In Philippi, Paul was arrested for preaching the gospel. They stripped him and beat him with rods and then they locked him up in a cell. After they let him out and kicked him out of town, he came to Thessalonica.

And what did Paul do in Thessalonica? Did he hide himself out of sight so that he could lick his wounds and feel sorry for himself? NO! He walked right into the synagogue and he preached that Jesus Christ is Lord knowing full well that he would likely wind up receiving a beating again! And when they chased him out of Thessalonica, he did the same thing in Berea. And when they chased him out of Berea, he did the same thing in Athens!

You see, Paul was no coward. That accusation could NEVER stick. I don't think personal mission statements were a thing in the first century, but I think we find Paul's in Acts 20:24. He says:

But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (Acts 20:24 ESV)

Paul's comfort meant nothing to him. Paul's safety meant nothing to him. Paul's LIFE meant nothing to him! All that mattered to him was that he continued on with the task that God had set before him. And that task often led him through danger and discomfort. I want to read a quote to you that absolutely rocked my world this week. Commentator Tom Schreiner says:

We should not conceive of Paul as engaging in mission and experiencing the unfortunate consequence of suffering in the process, as if his difficulties were unrelated to his mission. On the contrary, the pain Paul endured was the means by which the message of the gospel was extended to the nations. Suffering was not a side effect of the Pauline mission; rather it was at the very centre of his apostolic evangelism. His distress validated and legitimated his message, demonstrating the truth of the gospel.¹

That is profound! We often say: "Tell the world about Jesus and keep going even if you suffer for a while." In reality we should be saying: "Boldly tell the world about Jesus and EXPECT to suffer because God uses suffering to authenticate and amplify His message."

Think about it: Would Paul's ministry have been nearly as effective if he had not been so severely persecuted? Can you imagine if the Book of Acts read: "Paul lived in the quiet suburbs of Phillipi for a season until his RRSP's reached maturation. Then, after receiving his gift basket from the grateful locals (yes, even the magicians down the street thought Paul was delightful), he moved on to Thessalonica where a 6 bed-room house with 2 acres had been set aside for him. And through this ministry, the world was turned upside down (just like Paul's Saturday morning pancakes)!"

Part of what made his ministry so powerful – part of what so gripped these men and women – was the fact that Paul preached boldly when it was HARD. He preached the joy of Christ even though his back bore the scars of his last lashing. He preached the freedom of the gospel even as he was constantly locked away in prison. He preached the hope of glory even after having been nearly stoned to death by the people he came to reach. His suffering wasn't the sad by product of his ministry – his suffering was the ROCKET FUEL that made his ministry so effective!

Do we think of our hardships that way? So often, we assume that suffering and rejection are evidences of failure. On the contrary! Suffering and the rejection are often the means that God

¹ Tom Schreiner as quoted by Colin Hansen, Jeff Robinson EDS, *12 Faithful Men*, (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2018), 18.

uses to make our lives a compelling witness. They set the stage for our BOLD PROCLAMATION of a life-changing gospel!

Self-serving ministry pursues comfort at all costs. Faithful ministry counts the cost and surrenders everything for the sake of the gospel.

But we need to keep moving and we're going to pick up the pace a bit. Look with me now at verses 3-4:

³For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive,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. (1 Thessalonians 2:3-4 ESV)

Here we learn that faithful ministry strives to please God rather than man.

2. It strives to please God rather than man

While we don't have travelling teachers in our culture today, the same problem that they posed is alive and well. The travelling teachers lured people in with false promises and duplicity. They knew what the people wanted to hear, and they knew how to twist the message to serve their ends. That is the mark of a corrupt ministry and we are warned to keep an eye out for it. Paul warned his young mentee Timothy:

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 (2 Timothy 4:3 ESV)

Ironically, the opponents in Thessalonica accused Paul of doing just that. Paul was many things, but he was not an ear-tickler. He was no pleaser of men. He was a straight shooter. In fact, he was such a straight shooter and his sermons were so "unpolished" that he was often criticized. For example, in the city of Corinth his opponents accused Paul of writing fancy letters but of giving weak, unimpressive sermons. And do you remember how he responded to that criticism? He said:

but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23 ESV)

“I’m not going to play your games!” Paul said. “I’m not going to use the bells and whistles in an attempt to draw a crowd. I play one note, and I play it loud and unapologetically! I preach Christ and him crucified!”

There is an ever-present temptation to tell tickling ears what they want to hear. I feel it in the pulpit, I feel it in my relationships with my Christian brothers and sisters, and I feel it in my evangelism. If you’re being honest, there are times when you feel it to. “Perhaps, if I simply leave this part out, my loved one will accept Jesus. Perhaps, once we’ve established a stronger relationship, I will share with them that truth that I know they will hate.” Have you ever entertained those thoughts? Sometimes, in an attempt to justify our approach, we rename this ear-tickling. We say: “I just want to be *winsome*,” or, “I want to be *strategic*,” or, “I don’t want to be a *stumbling block*.” But those are just fancy ways of saying: “I don’t like telling people things that they don’t want to hear.” Paul refused to play that game, and he tells us exactly why in verse 4:

so we speak, not to please man, **but to please God** who tests our hearts. (1 Thessalonians 2:4b ESV)

Paul’s ministry was shaped by this humbling reality: God is listening.

Paul wouldn’t dare distort the message. He wouldn’t dare smooth off the rough edges. He wouldn’t lessen the offense of the cross or downplay the weight of man’s sin. He wasn’t afraid of man even though, humanly speaking he SHOULD have been. After all, this offensive message that Paul preached had led to beatings, stonings, whippings, imprisonment, abandonment, slander, desertion and had even brought him to the brink of death itself.

But Paul was faithful. He wasn’t preaching to please men. He was preaching to please God, so he held nothing back from the message that God had entrusted to him.

Late in his life, the prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon, spoke to a room full of young ministers who looked to him for leadership. He gazed out into the room and told these young men:

If I could be privileged to climb the pulpit stairs again, I resolved to leave out every bit of flourish from my sermons, to preach nothing but present and pressing truth, and to hurl it at the people with all my might.²

Faithful ministry strives to please God rather than men.

Let's continue in the text now. Look with me at verse 5:

⁵ For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed— God is witness. ⁶ Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. ⁷ But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. 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.

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. (1 Thessalonians 2:5-9 ESV)

Here we learn that faithful ministry gives self-sacrificially.

3. It gives self-sacrificially

The travelling teachers taught for gain. Some leveraged their position to indulge in sexual sin while others pursued glory and prestige. Some were just in it for the money. But Paul wasn't after any of that. He came to Thessalonica to give, not to take.

Now, it's worth noting here that Paul wouldn't have been wrong to receive pay from the Thessalonians. He reminds them of that in verse 6. As an apostle and as the one who was feeding the church spiritually, he had every right to reap material gain from his spiritual work. He wrote to the church in Corinth:

If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? ¹² If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? (1 Corinthians 3:11-12a ESV)

² Charles Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry*, (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 162.

Even if Paul HAD received financial support from the Thessalonians, he would have been well within his rights. That's what he's saying in verse 6 of our text. So, why then did Paul essentially "work for free" in Thessalonica? It appears that this was always his approach as he began a ministry in a new city. Jeffrey Weima notes:

Although Paul vigorously defended his right as an apostle to receive financial support, he chose not to make use of this right during his initial ministry in a particular city.³

Rather than making financial demands, Paul set up his trade and worked all day long to pay his own way while he brought the gospel to Thessalonica. He was gentle in his care for this fledgling church, like a mother who nurses her infant until the baby is strong enough to stand on its own. He gave them every ounce of his energy and he never demanded anything from them in return. And he tells us why in verse 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.** (1 Thessalonians 2:8 ESV)

This kind of self-sacrifice is driven by authentic love. You can't faithfully minister to people unless you genuinely love them. Paul loved this church, and he would work himself to death if it meant furthering the work of the gospel in their midst.

Faithful ministry is self-sacrificing ministry. If you serve the church because you want a paycheck, you're no different than a day laborer punching a timecard. But this applies to all ministry, not just vocational ministry. All ministry is costly. It's REWARDING! Don't get me wrong! But it comes at a great cost. Have you ever discipled someone who was saved out of a broken, messy life? That's a self-sacrificing ministry, isn't it? Have you attempted to share the gospel with someone only to have them laugh in your face? Have you studied all week long and then delivered a lesson to a room full of kids who are too busy picking their noses to listen? Faithful ministry is self-sacrificing ministry. Faithful ministry is more concerned with giving than it is with receiving.

³ Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 150.

Let's keep reading now. Look with me at verses 10-12:

¹⁰ You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. ¹¹ For you know how, like a father with his children, 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. (1 Thessalonians 2:10-12 ESV)

Here we learn that faithful ministry is above reproach.

4. It is above reproach

This is a good warning for anyone who would desire to be a disciple maker (and P.S. that's the job description for all of us!) If your actions throughout the week preach a different sermon than the one that comes out of your mouth on Sunday, then nobody in their right mind is going to listen to you. Nor should they.

Paul's life was in complete alignment with his message, and the Thessalonians knew that. Paul didn't simply preach to them once a week and then hide himself away until the next sermon. He did life with his people. They shared meals, they worked their trades, they walked and talked and lived in the presence of one another. The opponents who were slandering Paul's character stood no chance of swaying the church. Because the church knew Paul.

The love that Paul has for this church is so evident in this chapter. In the previous verses, Paul described his relationship with the church as that of a gentle mother caring for her children. Here, he describes himself as a father exhorting, encouraging and teaching the church how to walk in a manner worthy of their calling. In those days, young boys would accompany their fathers to work in order to learn the family trade. There, they would learn about discipline and respect and how to conduct themselves in the world.

Paul says, "That's what I did with you! Like a father with his sons, I showed you with my words and with my example how we are to live this life as citizens of God's kingdom."

I have often joked with my closest friends that, if I weren't a Christian, I would have probably joined a cult. Don't tweet that. But when I hear about these groups who bought 100 acres of land and moved in together to live life in a commune, I understand the appeal.

This North American, isolated lifestyle is not natural. God made us to live together. The Bible describes the church as one body with many members. He describes us as a temple built up of numerous stones, and as a family! 90 minutes together once a week does not seem to me to do justice to the glory of what we see in the text. And it doesn't seem to me to be the experience that Paul had in these churches that he established. Night and day, they were together. They saw each other at their best. They saw each other at their worst. And it was this intimacy and familiarity that laid the foundation for a trust that could endure Paul's exile from the city and the ensuing persecution from every side.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we should buy a commune. I'm not. But I do hunger for a richer, deeper, more intentional community. And it's in community where faithful ministry either shines or withers. Don't pat yourself on the back too hard when someone who only sees you for 90 minutes a week in your Sunday best thinks highly of you. Here's the real test: What does your spouse think of you? What do your kids think of you? What does your coworker think of you? That's where the rubber meets the road.

If someone were to assault your character today, would the people who know you will stand up and say: "There is NO WAY that this report is true!" Or would they hide their faces and whisper: "That sounds about right." The church in Thessalonica saw how Paul conducted himself in every circumstance. And his ministry stood up to that scrutiny. Faithful ministry is above reproach.

Let's continue reading. Look with me to verses 13-14:

¹³ And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. ¹⁴ For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, (1 Thessalonians 2:13-14 ESV)

Here, as Paul continues to make a defence for his ministry, he turns the spotlight off of himself and shines it onto the church. We learn in these final verses that a faithful ministry produces enduring fruit.

5. It produces enduring fruit

If the ministry is faithful, than the people who have been impacted by the ministry will be faithful. The lives of the church bear witness to the faithfulness of the ministry. If the fruit is healthy, then the root is healthy.

In laymen's terms, Paul says: "I know that my ministry in Thessalonica was faithful because the proof is in the pudding! Forget about what those scoffers are claiming! Look at yourselves! Even in the midst of persecution you continue to grow. YOU are the defence for my ministry!

If time permitted, I would love to stop and preach a whole sermon this morning on verse 13. One commentator summarizes it this way:

There is no difference between Paul's word and God's word.⁴

The opponents of the church were trying to cast doubt on Paul's message, but Paul says, "It was never my message anyway! It was God's message and that's why it moved so POWERFULLY in you!"

The opponents of the church today are just as intent to throw out "Paul's message." The scholars in their ivory towers would have us throw out *this* book of the Bible and disregard *that* chapter in Paul's letter and look with suspicion on *this* doctrine that Paul was always preaching about. But we would do well to remember that Paul's word is God's word! He spoke with Apostolic authority, and the proof is in the pudding! I've read plenty of the books and the commentaries written by those supposedly educated men. I've listened to the educated arguments. But give me five words from the anointed Apostle rather than five volumes from the educated elites!

⁴ Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 163.

The word of man tickles the ears. But the Word of God thunders! And where the word of God is preached, enduring fruit grows.

People who have heard from the living God are not easily swayed by the threats of men. We talked about that at length last week. In chapter 1, Paul's argument was that the perseverance of the church in Thessalonica proved the legitimacy of their calling. His point in today's text is that their perseverance proves the legitimacy of his ministry. If Paul had served the Thessalonians a bunch of man-made fluff, then they would have crumbled under this pressure. But Paul served them the living and active word of God, and their steadfastness is proof of that.

Finally, let's read from the second half of verse 14 to the end of verse 16 and consider one last evidence:

For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind ¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last! (1 Thessalonians 2:14b-16 ESV)

Here we learn that faithful ministry is marked by a fierce, protective love.

5. It is marked by a fierce, protective love

At first glance, these verses might seem a little jarring. Paul sounds angry and vindictive, and he directs that anger at the Jews. In fact, some skeptics have used these verses to accuse the Apostle Paul of anti-Semitism.

But let's remember this morning that Paul himself was a Jew! And there was likely no one alive in the first century not named Jesus who loved the Jewish people more than Paul did. That's why he always preached in the synagogue first when he came to a new town. That's why he could say of the Jews in Romans 9:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could

wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. (Romans 9:1-3 ESV)

Paul said: “I wish I could take their place in hell so that they could take my place in glory!”

So no, Paul was not an anti-Semite.

Paul just loved the church with a fierce, protective love. Paul wanted the gospel to go forth to all the nations and yet he was repeatedly resisted – and the force that most often stood up in opposition to the church was the Jewish religious leaders. When the gospel was making progress in a city, they would rise up to snuff it out. Jewish leaders chased Paul out of Thessalonica. Jewish leaders persecuted the church in Judea. Jewish leaders killed the prophets and Jewish leaders crucified Jesus. Paul was not angry at ethnic Jews – again, he HIMSELF was an ethnic Jew – but Paul WAS angry at the religious elites who were trying to keep the gentiles out of the kingdom of God. Commentator G.K. Beale is helpful here. He says:

The essence of the judgement is that people who shut the door to God’s presence in this life will have the door to God’s presence shut to them in the next life.⁵

That’s why Paul was so angry. Essentially, Paul was saying the same thing that Jesus said in Matthew 18:

whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matthew 18:6 ESV)

A faithful minister will not stand idly by while wolves rip sheep out of the fold. A faithful ministry will not be marked by passive indifference while the faith of the little ones is threatened. “Well this is an important message for pastors” you say! It sure is, but it’s a message for you as well. Lean in close. A faithful ministry in the home doesn’t stand idly by while Netflix, Youtube and Tiktok invite your children to see things that their little eyes should never see. A faithful ministry in the home doesn’t stand idly by while the faith of your spouse drifts into decay.

⁵ G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 83.

“This is a good message for ministers.” Yes it is. And Christian, that is exactly who you are. As the Apostle Peter reminded us:

But you are a chosen race, **a royal priesthood**, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9 ESV)

So, gospel ministers, is your ministry faithful? Are you bold, even in the face of opposition? Are you more concerned with pleasing God than you are with pleasing man? Does your love compel you to give of yourself sacrificially? Is your life above reproach? Are you seeing enduring fruit in your little ones? Do you fiercely protect the souls that have been entrusted to your care? The Apostle Paul said:

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1 ESV)

This is our calling. This is the bar that has been set for us. And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!