

Paul's Ministry

1 Thessalonians: 2:1-12

By Scott Huckaby

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This morning, we are going to take a look at the first part of First Thessalonians Chapter 2. The epistle of First Thessalonians was the first of Paul's letters that has been preserved for us.

- The Thessalonian Church was a congregation of new believers and Paul had only spent 3 weeks with them when he helped them start the church (per Acts 17:2).

Among the significant things revealed in this epistle is an important passage on the rapture of the church that we'll get to later in Chapter 4.

- We know from 2 Thessalonians 2:5 that Paul had discussed this doctrine with them during his original 3-week visit.

This means Paul considered the rapture of the church to be an important doctrine that should be shared with even new believers.

- In every chapter of both 1 & 2 Thessalonians, there is some reference to the return of the Lord.
- The rapture certainly is a teaching the church should be talking more about ...especially since today there is a whole lot of things going on to set the stage for what comes after the rapture.
- Following the rapture will be a terrible time when God pours out His wrath in preparation for Jesus to return.

The rapture of the church is when all Church Age believers, living and dead will receive eternal, resurrection bodies in an instant. Or as 1 Corinthians 15 says, in the twinkling of an eye.

- The Church Age had a spectacular beginning at Pentecost and it will likewise have spectacular end at the rapture.
- Jesus promised to come for us as a Bridegroom comes for His betrothed in John 14.
- The rapture is that event where He comes for us and it could happen at any time.
- There is nothing that has to precede the rapture... it is imminent: the point is to live ready for it.
- And you are ready if you know Jesus Christ as your Savior.

The Apostle Paul came to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, following being imprisoned in Philippi where he was miraculously freed from jail — only to be kicked out of the city.

- After only three weeks of prosperous ministry in Thessalonica, he had to flee from an angry mob. He moved on to Berea — again enjoying several weeks of ministry, but soon driven out by the same Thessalonian mob.
- His next stop was Athens where he preached a compelling sermon but had mixed results. By the time he came to Corinth, he was *in weakness, in fear and in much trembling* (according to 1 Corinthians 2:3).
- At this point of his second missionary journey, it seemed that Paul was very discouraged.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians was written while in Corinth. It is likely that Paul was greatly concerned about the churches he had just founded, and he wondered about their state.

- While at Corinth, Silas and Timothy came to him from Thessalonica with great news: the church there was standing firm in their faith (per Chapter 3).
- Paul became so excited that he dashed off this letter to the Thessalonians, probably his first letter to any church. He wrote it just a few months after he had first established the church in Thessalonica.
- This letter is intended to praise the Thessalonians for their faithfulness and encourage them in their growth.
- As we'll see later, he also wrote this letter to clear up certain questions about the Lord's return that must have been reported to him by Timothy and Silas.

After sending this letter, Paul enjoyed a sustained and fruitful ministry in Corinth... he eventually returned to the Thessalonians.

In the First Chapter that Bo covered last week, Paul praised the Thessalonians for being a good example to other new churches. In the Second Chapter we're going to look at this morning, the Apostle Paul reminded them about the example he set for them as encouragement to continue their being a good example.

- Paul also must have felt compelled to defend his ministry because of the way he had to leave them.

The first couple of verses address the integrity of Paul's ministry in Thessalonica...

1 Thessalonians 2:1-2 – *For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain. But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict.*

Paul defended his ministry here because he had many enemies in Thessalonica (per Acts 17:5-6, 13). These enemies would certainly have tried to discredit him in his absence, taking advantage of his hurried departure from Thessalonica.

- Paul's enemies probably accused him of being a self-serving coward because he left town quickly.

Paul wrote here in a personal manner, but this really wasn't a personal issue for Paul.

- He knew that it mattered for the sake of the Gospel.
- If Paul was discredited, then the Gospel message itself would be discredited.

We can surmise the false charges that were made against Paul from the way he explained himself in this chapter... Among the things they might have said was that:

- "Paul has to be untrustworthy because he had been flogged and imprisoned" (from v2).
- **Then from verse 3**, "Paul is a false teacher" and that, "his ministry is based on impure motives" and, "he deliberately deceives others"
- **from verse 4**, "Paul preaches to please people, not God"
- **from verse 5**, "Paul is in the ministry to get what he can out of it materially"
- **from verse 6**, "Paul only wants personal glory"
- **and from verse 7**, "Paul is something of a dictator"

These false accusations must have been relayed to Paul by Timothy and Silas as part of their report on the Thessalonian church.

Paul reminded the Thessalonians that his ministry was not in vain, that it was in fact successful... and their faith in Christ was the proof of that.

- His ministry was not empty or hollow, as if he were a huckster promoting some sketchy new product.

v2 – Paul reminded them of his adversity in Philippi. Acts 16:23-24 records that his suffering included a public flogging and having their feet in stocks while confined in the city's inner prison.

- Such a Roman flogging was no light matter; it was an experience not soon forgotten.
- When Paul arrived in Thessalonica, the wounds on his back from Philippi would have still been fresh.
- If Paul was in it for himself, he wasn't very good at serving his own interests.

It was noteworthy that Paul boldly shared the gospel with the Thessalonians following his recent persecution for doing that very thing.

- Despite what some of Paul's accusers said, he did not only preach the Gospel when it was easy or convenient.
- Paul knew what it was like to speak boldly for the Lord even *in much conflict*.

Speaking boldly reflects a state of mind enabling the words flow freely with confidence.

- It reveals an attitude of feeling quite at home with what you're sharing with no sense of stress or strain.

The strong opposition that Paul faced demanded boldness. The Greek word rendered *strong opposition* or *conflict* is a metaphor drawn from the athletic games or the arena. It refers to the contest as a race, struggle, or even a battle.

- Such a conflict always involves intense exertion and strenuous, persistent effort to overcome determined opposition.

Verses 3-5 address the integrity of Paul's message in Thessalonica...

³*For our exhortation did not come from error or uncleanness, nor was it in deceit. But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts. For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness—God is witness.*

People have always used religion to have power over others. And they have also used religion to make themselves wealthy.

- In Paul's first-century world, there were many competing religions, and it was common for the ministers of those religions to be motivated by greed and gain.

Paul couldn't be accused of using religion to control others or get wealthy because of:

- The persecution he has endured,
- The uniqueness of his message
- And his desire to move on in order to share the message with as many people as possible

The Thessalonians had been exposed to a lot of competing religions because their city sat on the Egnatian Way, the famous highway that went east to west through Macedonia.

- Thessalonica was an important port and a melting pot city with cultures from all over the world.

There was also a staggering variety of religions and religious professionals in Thessalonica; represented there were:

- The gods of the Olympian pantheon, especially Apollo, Athena, and Hercules.
- There were the native Greek mystery religions, including the worship of Dionysis, which was basically a sex & drinking cult.
- The Greek intellectual and philosophical traditions were represented.
- There were also shrines to many Egyptian gods: Isis, Sarapis, and Anubis.
- And of course, there were the Roman State cults that deified the political heroes of Rome.
- And then there were the Jewish people and the God-fearing Gentiles.

Most of these religions were missionary minded and sought to spread their faith using itinerant evangelists and preachers.

- Their missionaries were opportunists, who took everything they could from their listeners, and when that support dried up, they moved on to find someone else.

v4 – Makes it clear that Paul wasn't looking for praise from men in his gospel message... Paul knew the Gospel wouldn't always please men, but he knew that sharing it was pleasing to God.

Why do you think the gospel so offensive to some?

It makes you dependent on and accountable to God instead of yourself.

- Pride keeps people from acknowledging their need for the Savior.

The good news about Jesus is very simple...

John 3:16 – *God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

God provided a way for us to spend eternity with Him when Jesus satisfied the requirements of the Law by dying on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin.

This is so simple a child can understand it. Indeed, Jesus referred to child-like faith as being necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven in Matthew 18:3.

So, why do you think more people don't embrace the good news about Jesus?

Pride... they rather trust in their own reasoning than what God has revealed in the Bible.

This week I saw a quote from President Trump talking about his effort to end the war in Ukraine: "I want to try and get into heaven... If I can get into heaven, this will be one of the reasons."

- Clearly President Trump doesn't understand the gospel... he is trusting in his good works to get into heaven.
- You'd think that Franklin Graham or some of the other faith advisors close to him would have explained the gospel to him more clearly.

Pray for President Trump... he clearly wants to get to heaven, but he needs to trust in God's provision of Jesus Christ, not his own efforts to earn favor with God.

Alright, back to our text... It should have been clear that Paul's message was approved by God because it was reinforced by the Scriptures they had which was the Old Testament. That was certainly recognized by the Bereans where Paul went after Thessalonica...

Acts 17:11 (speaking of the Bereans:) – *These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.*

The Bereans were not searching the Scriptures in order to dispute with Paul, they were seeking to enthusiastically confirm what he shared with them.

Some Scriptures the Bereans might have looked at to confirm Paul's gospel message probably included those that addressed the Suffering Servant Messiah... like Psalm 16:8-11, Psalm 22, and Isaiah 53.

- Jesus certainly fulfilled the prophecies of the Suffering Servant Messiah

v5 – What wasn't part of Paul's ministry was the use of *flattering words*, which would have been a *cloak for covetousness*: Paul understood that *covetousness* is always concealed by deceptive rhetoric.

- But Paul did not use the *flattering words* that often serves as a *cloak for covetousness*.

The problem with flattery is that it is usually insincere being directed to the pleasure of the person being flattered.

- The Greek term has the idea of using fair words as a means of gaining one's own ends.

The problem with covetousness is that it is essentially greed. The Greek word reflects the self-seeking of all types, a quest for anything that brings self-satisfaction.

- Covetousness and greed grow out of complete disinterest in the rights of others — an attitude foreign to Paul and his ministry partners.

In verses 6-7 – Paul's gentle, humble attitude among the Thessalonians demonstrated that his motives were pure...

⁶Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children.

We know Paul did not seek personal glory in his ministry to the Thessalonians because he didn't need fancy introductions or lavish praise.

- Paul's satisfaction came from his relationship with Jesus, not from the praise of people.

Paul's needs for security and acceptance were met primarily in Jesus. This meant that he didn't spend his life pursuing the acceptance of men.

- He ministered from a solid understanding of his identity in Jesus.

While Paul had authority as an apostle of Christ, he didn't exercise that authority.

- Paul was among the Thessalonians to *give* them something, not to *take* something from them.
- So, he did not come making demands as an apostle.

v7 – Paul instead was like *a nursing mother*, who only looks to *give* to her child. Though some among the Thessalonians had accused Paul of ministering out of self-interest, Paul simply asks the Christians in Thessalonica to remember the *gentle* character of his ministry *among* them.

In verses 8-9 – Paul's self-support and hard work among the Thessalonians demonstrated that his motives were pure...

⁸So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God.

Paul had demonstrated his love of the Thessalonians through the sacrifices he endured for the sake of his ministry. And he did not consider his ministry to the Thessalonians to be a burden.

- Paul was *well pleased* to spend time with them because the Thessalonians *had become dear* to him and his associates.

Paul had given of his own life to the Thessalonians in the time he spent with them, his openness about his life, and all the things he did to show that he cared for them.

- It has been said that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

v9 – Paul's toil and hardship was working so that he and his ministry partners would not be a burden to the Thessalonians. Paul certainly recognized his right to be supported by those he ministered to...

1 Corinthians 9:14 – *the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.*

But Paul voluntarily gave up that right to set himself apart from the missionaries of false religions.

- Paul denied his rights and took a higher standard upon himself.

We know that Paul was not a burden in his ministry because he worked the trade of a tentmaker to support himself. Acts 18:3 tells us he worked that trade in Corinth where he had an extended stay.

- This probably wasn't the case in Thessalonica because he was only there for a short time but it reflected his attitude of supporting himself and being a blessing instead of a burden.

In verses 10-12 – Paul's own behavior and message to the Thessalonians demonstrated the integrity of his character before God and men.

¹⁰You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

Paul invited the consideration of his life as an example in evaluating the legitimacy of the gospel.

- Paul wanted people to look to Jesus, but he could also tell them to look at *his* life, because the power of Jesus was real in his life.
- Paul also offered up his life as an example in Philippians 3:17 and 1 Corinthians 11:1.

Each of us should also seek to be an example for other Christians. This is a worthy goal for all Christians today; to live a life that declares *how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among others*.

- This is the kind of life that draws others to follow Jesus for themselves.

v11 – As part of the example Paul set was to encourage and comfort the Thessalonians, *as a father does his own children*. Indeed, by introducing the Thessalonians to Christ, Paul was essentially a spiritual father to them.

v12 – Paul’s desire for his spiritual children was that they *would walk worthy of God who calls [them] into His own kingdom and glory*.

- The glory we will have refers to our glorification, when we receive our eternal, resurrected bodies at the rapture of the church.
- Our new resurrection bodies will be like Jesus showed us He had following His resurrection.

The kingdom here would certainly apply to the spiritual kingdom of the Church Age.

- However, since the context here is our glorification, the kingdom this is talking about is something else:
- When the Jews spoke of the kingdom, they were speaking of the reign of the Messiah on earth when God would fulfill His promises to Israel.

One of my favorite Bible teachers is Dr. Andy Woods, the senior pastor of Sugarland Bible Church who says that the reference to “kingdom” in the New Testament is a technical term that always refers to the Millennial Kingdom; the term “millennial” reflects the 1,000 years of the Lord’s reign.

- These 1,000 years of the Lord’s physical reign on earth are mentioned six times in Revelation 20.

The Millennial Kingdom will be an amazing time when Jesus physically rules on earth, there will be peace among the nations, most of the curse will be removed, and there will be no demons roaming around to tempt people.

- I know this sounds like the Eternal State, but it’s not; Isaiah 65:20 makes it clear that mortal people will be on earth during that time.
- I’ve heard the Millennial Kingdom described as the front porch of the Eternal State... it foreshadows the Eternal State in a lot of respects but salvation still hangs in the balance for its mortal people.

We as Christians can also look forward to the Millennial Kingdom because we will be ruling on the earth with the Lord in our resurrected bodies.

- Jesus promised us in John 14:3 that when He comes for us, we may be where He is. And where He will be during the Millennial Kingdom is ruling on the earth.
- Jesus also promised us in Revelation 2 & 5 that we’d rule with Him.
- Revelation 19 describes the glorious return of the Lord to the earth accompanied by the armies in heaven.
- Everyone here who has been born again will be part of that army, won’t that be amazing!

Alright, what observations have you made about this passage?

Do you have any take-away’s you’d like to share?

I have some applications as take-aways...

- We should always speak the good news of Christ boldly and with confidence.
- Scripture confirms those speaking God’s Word; make sure those you listen to are authenticated by the Bible.
- We should set an example that attracts others to Jesus.