

Gospel Work (1 Thess 2-3)

David Hare's play *Racing Demon* portrays a team of Anglican clergy in South London. Each one has a different idea of **the purpose of ministry**. To Lionel Epsy, the gentle and largely ineffective team rector, 'our job is mainly to learn. From ordinary working people. We should try to learn and understand them.' But he says, 'Mostly in fact, it's just listening to their anger, and like a punching bag absorbing it.'

In contrast, Tony Ferris who is young and charismatic says, 'I have this incredible power. I can spread confidence around myself.' But mostly it comes at the expense of others.

Another priest emphasises Holy Communion. And he says, 'As a priest you only have one duty. That's to put on a show.'

Another sees the heart of the job as 'preventing problems growing into issues.'

And Donald Bacon (nicknamed Streaky), sings in tenor, gets drunk, and describes himself as a happy priest. 'The whole thing is so clear,' he says '..it's people's happiness.'

What is the purpose of ministry? What's gospel work all about? What's a pastor for?

As we come to the next section of 1 Thessalonians, we learn some crucial lessons from the Apostle Paul about gospel work.

The background is Paul's second missionary journey to the city of Thessalonica (modern day Thessaloniki). Last week we heard how Paul and his buddies came and preached the gospel of God. And great things happened. But their mission was cut short. They had to run for their lives.

They were chased out of town. And after Paul and his buddies left, the Jews from Thessalonica started a smear campaign against them (Acts 17:13). The sort of things they were probably saying were, “He ran away. He doesn’t really care about you. He’s just after your money. He’s only in the job for what he can get out of it, sex, fame and power. He cares more about his own skin than yours.”

So in the section we’re going to look at now, 1 Thessalonians 2 & 3, Paul is making a defence. He defends his visit to and vacating from the Thessalonians. These chapters give us great insight into Paul’s pastoral heart. **You know Paul wasn’t a superhero. He wasn’t like Spider-man or Batman.** It’s true he was an Apostle and we’re not. He saw the risen Lord and got a direct commission. He received special inspiration from the Holy Spirit to teach with authority and write most of the New Testament. Yet, other aspects of the apostles’ ministry were not unique for them. Like their pastoral concern and care.

Paul Tripp says in his book *Lead*, “**Paul is not a painting we gaze at in awe. Rather he is a window to the awesome rescuing grace of the Redeemer.**” So as we look into Paul’s pastoral heart, it’s actually a window into the heart of our Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus who can change us so that we can serve and love one another more and more.

Christian ministry is about serving the gospel and the church. Let’s see what lessons we can learn. Paul begins in chapter 2:1-6 by defending his motives in coming to Thessalonica.

1. Paul’s Motives (2:1-6)

Check out from verse 1, “**For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain.**” The word translated ‘vain’ is *kenos* in Greek. It looks like he means fruitless but it’s more likely he means that their visit wasn’t aimless. They had a purpose in coming. They had a mission. It’s clear by the contrastive word ‘But’ It’s there in verse 2, “**But...we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God.**” Their mission, the reason they came to Thessalonica was to preach the gospel. Paul didn’t come empty handed but with the gospel of God. He wasn’t coming to get something out of them, but give them something - the gospel of God. And they did it with boldness. Their mission was open and public. Paul had nothing to hide. What he did and what he was, was in the open. People could see it. The Thessalonians could see it. That’s why Paul appeals to them. “**You know**” in verse 1. And verse 5, “**we never came to you with words of flattery, as you know**” Down in verse 10, “**You are witnesses.**”

Paul’s ministry was transparent. As all gospel work should be. We need more openness. Those involved in gospel work need to be able to demonstrate that our conscience is clear. And we have nothing to hide.

The key to doing this is...**a secret life**; A life lived before God. **Paul’s emphasis all the way through is on God.** Check it out, verse 2, “**boldness in our God, the gospel of God,**” verse 4, “**approved by God, pleasing God,**” verse 5, “**God is our witness**” and so on. Paul lived his life *Coram Dei*, before the face of God. **He was playing (or preaching) to an audience of 1.** Christianity is a concerned with the heart first of all. Our motives matter.

Check out from verse 3, “**For our appeal doesn’t not spring from error or impure motives, we aren’t trying to trick you. On the contrary we speak as those approved by God, entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who test our hearts.**” That last bit sums up the right motivation for gospel

work: ***God-pleasers not people pleasers***. God who searches and tests our hearts.

Get this: the motivation matters more than the action. I can preach my guts out, and have a full church, and even have a *Jon Brown Ministries*. But if I'm in it for myself or for any other reason other than God's glory, it all stinks. Perish the thought! I'd rather die and be forgotten but have Christ, than be rich and famous but not have Him. Better to scrub toilets in the kingdom than be a big shot outside the kingdom. **Think of Ravi Zacharias, in our eyes he was smart and successful. He had it all!** But God knows and tests the heart. And if the heart isn't right, the work stinks of self.

But if your heart is right before God, you got nothing to fear. The Lord knows. **Think of the woman in the temple who gave the two mites. No one saw it did they. It was too small to see. It was insignificant by human standards. But the Lord saw it.** And two measly mites given to God is more than millions of dollars given for selfish reasons. Motives matter. Paul knew it. He wasn't after popularity. He wasn't a people pleaser, but a God-pleaser. He got that from Jesus didn't he. Jesus had nothing to hide. There was no deceit in him. And Paul was a servant of Jesus Christ, and Christ changed him and made him fearless. And Paul could speak with plainness of speech. God delivered him from the tyranny of human criticism. Of course we listen to people's criticism, but it's not the be all and end all. What God thinks and says about me is more important than any human being's judgement.

And moreover, God is a more merciful judge than any human being. I'd soon rather have my merciful Father know all my faults than any human! **Our God is compassionate and kind, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.** And so we have Paul's motives for gospel work, in a nut shell: ***God-pleasing not people-pleasing***.

2. Paul's Methods (vv. 7-16)

In the rest of chapter 2, Paul defends his methods in coming to the Thessalonians. What were his ministry methods? They can be summed up in three metaphors: a mother, a father, and a herald.

(A) A Mother (vv. 7-8)...

Paul just finished saying in verse 6 that although he was an apostle, he didn't beat them into submission with his title. Although he had an office of great authority, he didn't use it with them. **He wasn't heavy like a dump truck unloading the truth on to them.** Instead he was...**like a mother**. Notice in verse 7, **"In contrast, we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children."** This is surprising coming from a man as tough and masculine as Paul. He was tough guy. Tough as old boots. Yet he's using such a feminine metaphor. His ministry among the Thessalonians was a maternal ministry. Marked out by gentleness and self-sacrifice (v. 8).

A mother is gentle with her children isn't she. **Not like a dump truck unloading truth on people. Not swinging their authority around like a cricket bat.** But the great Apostle Paul was gentle, like a nursing mother feeding the truth to them. Nurturing them in the faith. Gentleness is a necessity in ministry. As Paul says to Timothy, **"The Lord's servant must be...gentle."**

The next next quality that marks a mother is self-sacrifice. Notice in verse 8, **"We loved you so much, so much that we shared not only the Gospel of God, but also our own selves."** Those who started the smear campaign against Paul said he was only in it for himself. But here he says he wasn't in it for what he could get out of it. **He was there to give.** Not just the gospel but himself. Like a mother with a child. Mothers gives themselves to

their new baby don't they. A mother's whole life revolves around caring for the baby. There's a great acronym for MOTHER:

M - for the **Many** things she gave me.

O - for the **Other** things she gave me.

T - for the **Things** she gave me.

H - for **Her** things she gave me.

E - for **Everything** she gave me.

R - for the **Rest** of the things she gave me.

In the same way, Paul gave himself for the Thessalonians. Where did this gentleness and deep love from? Were they natural qualities of the Apostle? No! He was naturally a murder and violent man. But Jesus saved him and changed him. Jesus - gentle and lowly in heart.

(B) A Father (vv. 9-12)...

Strikingly, Paul combines both mother and father metaphors to describe gospel work. His next method is there in verse 11, "**For you know how, like a father with his children.**" There are two things that mark out Paul's paternal ministry: example and instruction. Check out his example in verses 9-10, "**For you remember our labour and toil...we worked night and day.**" Paul worked his butt off for them. And he went out of his way so that no charge of selfish gain could come against them. So Paul and his buddies set the example by hard work, and next a **holy life** in verse 10. They say as a parent you can't expect your children to be something you're not. It's the same in ministry. Your life is the most powerful sermon. But words still matter. Notice in verse 12? "**We exhorted, encouraged and charged you to walk work of God.**" There's gentleness and firmness. Mercy and severity. Because what's at stake is God's kingdom and glory.

(C) A Herald (vv. 13-16)...

Paul's overarching method was to preach the gospel; to be a herald. Already he's talked about 'our gospel, the word, the word of the Lord, the gospel of God. And here in verse 13 Paul thanks God that the Thessalonians received the word of God. Paul is certain his message came from God. He didn't invent it. He's not speculating. ***This basic conviction that the gospel is a message from God is really the most important characteristic of gospel work.*** We need to recover our confidence in the gospel. We need to get excited about it again. It is the word of God! It's the gospel of God! It's not another opinion. It's not speculating.

Many Christians speak their own opinions with confidence but God's word with diffidence. **When given the opportunity to declare the message, it's like we're going through Customs at the airport. And the officer asks, "Do you have anything to declare?" "No" we answer. "Nothing."** Every Christian has something to declare: the word of God! It's powerful. The proof is in the fact it changes lives. It changed the lives the Thessalonians. It changed me. The word is at work in you. This was shown in the Thessalonians in the way they received it but also suffered.

Paul says some harsh things about the Jews in vv. 15-16. He predicts God's judgment on them for rejecting their Messiah. But salvation was still available to them, Paul preached in the synagogues first didn't he. It was those who rejected the Lord Jesus and blocked others from doing so, that deserved God's wrath. And the same warning goes out today for those who try to block the word of God from going out.

So far Paul has been defending his visit to Thessalonica. We've seen his motives and methods for ministry. And what stands out is his double commitment: to the word of God, and to the people of God. To the gospel and to the church. And from verse 17 to the end of chapter three, Paul defends his reason for leaving them.

3. Why Paul was missing (2:17-3:13)

And what we see in this section is an illustration of Paul's pastoral heart. We've already heard his ministry was both maternal and paternal. What I want to zoom in on here is his parental love for this church.

The smear campaign was happening. And here Paul makes a five-fold rebuttal against their accusations.

1. He didn't run away, but was torn away. Verse 17. He left with great reluctance.
2. He tried hard to come back to them. Verse 18, "I Paul, again and again wanted to come to you, but Satan stopped us."
3. Chapter 3:1-5. They sent Timothy back. This would have been a real sacrifice. When he got to Athens he sent for help from Silas and Timothy in Berea. But when there was no word about the Thessalonians he sent Timothy back.
4. He was stoked when Timothy came back with good news. Verse 6.
5. He'd been praying for them verses 10-13. Night and day.

There we go. A five fold rebuttal that proves that Paul truly did love them. You might be wondering, 'What's with all this exaggerated language?' Torn away from you. You are our glory and joy. We could bear it no longer. For now we live if you are standing fast in the Lord? What's the deal? I don't know about

you, but I don't know if I've ever felt like this about people in church? Paul's whole life seems to be bound up in their life.

Let's finish where we begun, Paul isn't a painting that we gaze at in awe. But he's a window, a window into the heart of Christ. Christ is the perfect servant of the church. He came with pure motives. Only love. He was truly gentle like a mother and gave his own life for the sake of his church. He was the perfect example of holiness. He never sinned. He is the Word of God. And his life is completely bound up in our life - the church is His body. He always lives to make intercession for us.

So as we set about gospel work, we do it looking to him, praying that His love would constrain us. And this would push us out to serve the gospel and the church until we see Him face to face.

Prayer

Lord make our love for one another increase more and more. Establish our hearts so that we are blameless and holy when our Lord Jesus returns. Amen.

Song

Servants of the Gospel

Benediction

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.