

A Model of Ministry to Follow

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Many years ago I heard a speaker at a student conference tell a story about a letter that he received from a young woman about a situation she faced. As he was telling the story, I knew that I had heard the exact same story a couple of years before in a talk that Josh McDowell gave. Now, sometimes speakers will share stories that they've heard others give, but they will give them credit for it. That's not what this speaker did. He told the story as if it happened to him. Certainly, it was more powerful to tell it that way, but it wasn't true and because it wasn't true, I lost respect for this teacher. Never again did I care to be taught by him because I no longer trusted him. How he went about his ministry ultimately affected the fruit of his ministry.

Unfortunately, this kind of thing is all too common, isn't it? Most of us are aware of situations where someone went about his or her ministry the wrong way and they lost credibility with you. We've seen it with nationally known leaders, but many of us have experienced it closer to home as well. How a person went about their ministry affected the fruit of their ministry.

The same could be said for the apostle Paul. But in his case he went about ministry the right way. As we will see in 1 Thessalonians 2 today, His is a model of ministry that we can follow.

If you feel a bit of déjà vu today it is because four weeks ago we looked at this passage as part of our sermon series on active compassion. We looked at the cost of compassion for Paul. Today, we are going to look at the passage again, but with a verse-by-verse approach to understand better what God has to say to us about a model of ministry.

Steve mentioned last week that Paul was forced to flee the city of Thessalonica and the new church that he had planted there due to the growing opposition. Jewish opponents had stirred up the crowds and the authorities against Paul. These were people who sought to destroy the work of Paul. It is very likely that one of the ways they sought to do this, once Paul left, was to try to discredit Paul. They wanted the new converts to believe that Paul was not what he really presented himself to be – that he did what he did for self-serving reasons.

And so in this chapter Paul is making his defense against such attacks. In this defense, we see a model of ministry and it is a model that we can follow. For those of you who are serving in any kind of ministry the implications of what we will look at here today will be quite apparent. But I'd also like to suggest that for all of us there will be implications. For instance, in our sermon series on active compassion we encouraged each one of us to develop friendships with those who are far from God. What Paul says here will apply to how we go about doing that. As well, most of us have people in our lives that we have some kind of influence on – children, friends, family, coworkers. I believe that Paul's model of ministry will also speak to how we interact in those situations as well.

And so let's look at Paul's model of ministry.

Verse 1:

1 For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, 2 but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition.

Paul repeatedly appeals to the Thessalonians' own knowledge of his ministry in this chapter. *You yourselves know*, he says, *that our coming to you was not in vain*. In other words, their ministry in Thessalonica was not a failure; it bore the intended fruit.

It bore its intended fruit as they came to Thessalonica and boldly spoke the gospel. That they spoke with *boldness* means that they dared to speak freely about the gospel after having *already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi* (remember, they were beaten and imprisoned in Philippi). It would have been understandable if they had grown timid about the gospel, especially since strong opposition arose in Thessalonica too. But they found boldness in God.

If Paul's ministry had been for selfish reasons it is doubtful that he would have laid his life on the line. And so, one proof of the sincerity of Paul's ministry was that he spoke the gospel with boldness in the face of opposition.

In verse 3, Paul explains why they had boldness in God. They had boldness because they were not motivated by self-serving reasons and that led to boldness.

3 For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts.

These charges of error, impurity and deceit were often brought against the many traveling philosophers and teachers that made their way around the Greek world at this time peddling their teachings and living at the expense of their followers. Paul says that they were nothing like that. They had not wandered from the path of truth. They were completely morally upright. And, there was no trickery in the things they preached. They were not like others who ministered for self-centered reasons.

In fact, Paul says, *we have been approved by God*. Being *approved* carries the idea of having been tested and having successfully completed that test, one is accepted or approved. God, he says, has evaluated their character and judged them worthy *to be entrusted with the gospel*. And because of that, he says, *we speak*, but we speak to please God and not for the approval of man. Before God, the one who knows us at a heart level, Paul says, we have complete integrity.

Now, all of what Paul has said up to this point describes how they ministered everywhere. In verse 5, he specifically talks about their ministry at Thessalonica.

Pauls says:

5 For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness—6 nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority.

Flattering speech is saying nice words to gain advantage with the listeners for selfish reasons. We never did that, Paul says, *as you know*. Nor did they come with a *pretext for greed* (the NIV says that they didn't "put on a mask to cover up greed"). Not only did they look free of greed, they really were free of greed. They weren't covering up greed. And they *did not seek glory from men*. They didn't seek the praise or honor of men.

All of these things were techniques that the traveling charlatans used, but not Paul. They were free of unworthy motives and actions. There was nothing improper in what they said or did. There was complete integrity in their ministry.

One of the most respected church figures over the past 60 years is Billy Graham. Certainly, he has faced criticism over the years, but no scandals have rocked his ministry. One of the major reasons why Graham and his associates have avoided scandals goes back to a meeting that took place in a hotel room in Modesto, CA in November of 1948. Graham and his associates were just starting to get involved in evangelistic meetings. At the time there were many traveling evangelists and a number of them had fallen due to moral, ethical and financial misconduct. And so, in a desire to see their ministry remain above scandal, Billy Graham, George Beverly Shea, Grady Wilson and Cliff Barrows met to discuss the problems evangelists faced. They came up with four problems to avoid and ways to avoid them. What they came up with came to be known as the Modesto Manifesto. It addressed how they would handle money; how they would protect themselves from immorality; how they would avoid exaggerating the numbers attending and being saved at their meetings; and, how they would avoid criticizing local pastors who criticized them. They put in place practices to avoid temptation in these areas as well as to avoid even the appearance of impropriety in these areas. As a result they have conducted themselves in integrity (*A Prophet with Honor*, Martin, 106-07).

In the same way, Paul's ministry was completely above board; full of integrity even though false charges were made against him.

Now, up to this point Paul has primarily been defending himself against the false charges, but starting in verse 7 he begins to set out a positive description of his ministry. Instead of wielding heavy authority, they were gentle.

7 But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. 8 Having so fond an affection 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 very dear to us.

Paul says they dealt with the Thessalonians like a nursing mother who *tenderly cares for her own children*. The image suggests one who gives great effort to protect and provide for her little one even at great personal sacrifice. That's how we lived among you, Paul says.

If there was one thing that pointed to the genuineness of their ministry it was their love for the people. They had a *fond affection* for them and out of that love it was their pleasure to not only to share the gospel with them, but even their own lives. Imparting their lives points to self-denial on behalf of the Thessalonians.

In verse 9 Paul explains one way this self-denial was lived out.

9 For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.

Paul again appeals to the Thessalonians' knowledge. *You recall, brethren* how we worked hard to not be a financial burden to you. They worked during the day and they work during the night to be able to support themselves while they preached the gospel. Paul was a tent-maker by training and so he used this skill to support himself while preaching the gospel. Again, this is in contrast to many of the other traveling philosophers and preachers who did become financial burdens to the people they taught. Paul wanted to offer the gospel for free to eliminate any charge of selfish motives. And so without a doubt their ministry was not for selfish reasons; it wasn't for personal gain, rather, it flowed out of love and a commitment to do that which was good for the Thessalonians.

Verses 10-12 are one long sentence in the original language. Some of the grammar is a bit difficult and so you will see verse breaks in different spots in different translations, but the meaning is clear.

10 You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers;

Paul again points to their integrity. They were devout; meaning that did what they did in a manner that pleased God. They were upright – all of their conduct was morally appropriate. And they were blameless. The idea here is that their conduct was untainted by any fault. Paul says, you witnessed the complete integrity of all of our behavior, Thessalonians, and so did God.

In verse 11 Paul appeals again to their knowledge. He says:

11 just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, 12 so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

In verse 7 Paul used the analogy of a mother; here he uses the analogy of a father. He was like a father in his teaching ministry. He exhorted and encouraged them. Exhort has a sense of urging on and admonishing them while encouraging is more of a comforting and consoling kind of thing. *Imploring* is kind of a solemn address to them; it is an insisting or urging them on to a certain kind of behavior. Paul was like a father urging them on and calling out a certain kind of behavior just like a godly father does for his kids. This too, he says, *you know*.

Verse 12 gives the reason for all of this. It is *so that you would walk in a manner worthy of God*. This was the goal of Paul ministry – that the Thessalonians would live lives that were worthy of God. At the heart of why Paul did what he did, it was about God and what God deserves. In Paul's mind God deserved that people would live lives worthy of Him and that is why he ministered.

Now, having looked at the passage and Paul's model of ministry, I'd like to summarize some of the motives and the character of Paul's ministry and consider how we might pursue these things as well.

Motives: First, let's talk about his motives. The accusation was that Paul did what he did for selfish reasons. But he was not motivated by having a good looking ministry or by personal acclaim or by financial gain. Rather, he was motivated by two noble things. First, he was motivated to do that which was truly good and helpful for those to whom he ministered. It was all about the Thessalonians and what would truly help them grow up in Christ.

But secondly, I believe his highest motivation is what we just looked at. He was motivated by God and His worth. He believed God deserved that people live lives that honor Him. And so Paul worked hard to call people up to this kind of worthy life. He sacrificed and worked hard and was willing to put his life on the line because God is worthy of having people live worthy lives.

As you think about your ministry or about our challenge to you to befriend someone who is far away from God or even about those people with whom you have influence, what motivates you in those areas? Do you serve and do what you do for the good of others and for the glory of God or would you have to say you really do what you do because of selfish reasons? Probably the honest truth for most of us is that it is a mixture.

This area of motivation is something that we address in the Network course. Every time I teach that session I realize how this can be such a struggle. I want to be able to say that everything I do in ministry is about God's glory and that which is good for others, but if I'm absolutely honest with myself, I have to say that sometimes what I do is really

more about myself. For instance, sometimes it is pretty easy to want people to think favorably about me and my ministry and so I'll work really hard to do a good job on a certain area of ministry to earn those kinds of thoughts. This is being motivated for the approval of man. It is less than a noble motivation.

To be motivated as purely as Paul was is a work of God's Spirit in our hearts. And so if you sense that you are not motivated by the glory of God and the good of others, cry out to God; ask Him to purify your motives. Ask Him to help you die to yourself and to selfish motivations.

Paul's ministry is a great model for us because of his motives, but secondly, it is a great model because of the character with which he carried out his ministry.

Character: I think there are a number of things that we see in terms of character, but I want to highlight three. Paul went about his ministry with integrity, love and commitment.

In terms of integrity, there was nothing false or hidden in Paul's ministry. There were no ulterior motives. He was above board. There was no greed; there was no impurity – there was nothing of the sort. He could say that I have full integrity before the God who examines my heart.

Do we have integrity in our ministries? Is everything appropriate, above board? Have we put away greed and selfish ambition? Is everything done with purity? Do we avoid flattery? Do we do what we do with integrity?

In terms of love, we see it all over this passage. Paul had a fond affection for them; he was gentle like a mother; he urged them on like a father; all of this because he loved them so much. We'll see this more in a couple of weeks.

Do we do what we do because of love? Do we truly love those to whom we minister? Do we truly love that person who is far away from God?

And finally, in terms of character, we see commitment. We see it in his courage to speak out boldly in the face of danger. We see it in his willingness to not just give a message, but to offer his very life as he says in verse 8. Out of that commitment he worked to support himself and to not be a burden to the Thessalonians. Paul was committed. He was fully in.

How about us? Are we fully in? Or are we holding back in some way? I'm not saying you need to be in full time ministry, but what I am saying is that in the areas of influence that you have are you committed in a way that is appropriate to what God has called you to? Are you willing to make sacrifices that would bear good fruit in the lives of others? Or are you only willing to give up to a level where it really doesn't cost you anything? Paul didn't do that; he was fully committed.

Again, if you sense any lack of integrity, or love or commitment, the place to start is to call out to God. Ask God to help you grow in integrity. Ask Him to give you genuine and pure love for the people you have influence. Ask Him to give you a heart willing to sacrifice for the good of others.

As you know, over the past year and a half we have been on a journey to figure out our vision as a church. You might have noticed the five strategic initiatives of vision posted out in the foyer. We are excited about the vision that God has given to us as a church. We believe that as we pursue this vision we will grow as a church in terms of our kingdom influence and that is exciting. But as we do this, it needs to be about God and His glory; not about us. And it needs to be about other people and not our own honor and glory. And we need to go about it with the right character of integrity, love and commitment in all we do. Because, remember, how we go about ministry will affect the fruit of our ministry.

Amen.