

This morning, I am in the third week of a sermon series through 1 Thessalonians, which was a letter written by a leader in the early church named Paul to a church in Thessalonica that he had been instrumental in starting around the year 49 AD. Over the past two weeks, we looked at the message that Paul brought to the Corinthians as well as his relationship with them. **The message**, which he calls “our gospel,” is that Jesus Christ died for our sins, as God made a way for us to be restored to a right relationship with Him, to be saved from eternal separation from Him, and to have eternal life. God is the initiator of our faith: He chose us, He gave us spiritual life by giving us His Holy Spirit, and is the power for our ongoing spiritual growth. Our role is to respond to his offer by repenting – turning from our idols, the things of this world that we trust in for our salvation and comfort and joy - and turn in faith and trust to Jesus. And last week we looked at **God’s vision for the church**, that we would be a place where people are genuinely concerned about the welfare of each other, and where discipleship happens, as we follow people worthy of imitation and live lives worthy of imitation.

This morning, we are going to read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-20. The context of this passage, as you may remember from week 1, is that Paul and his companions were driven out of town by a mob of angry Jews who found his message about Jesus being Lord to be blasphemous. And 2-3 years later, Paul had not been able to return to Thessalonica. In the meantime, all kinds of slanderous accusations had been leveled against Paul by his opponents, and he takes the time in this section of the letter to address those accusations and assure them of his integrity and his devotion to them.

*NIV 1 Thessalonians 2:1-20 - You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. <sup>2</sup> We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. <sup>3</sup> For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. <sup>4</sup> On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, **who tests our hearts**. <sup>5</sup> You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed-- God is our witness. <sup>6</sup> We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, <sup>7</sup> but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. <sup>8</sup> We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so **dear to us**. <sup>9</sup> Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. <sup>10</sup> You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and*

*blameless we were among you who believed. <sup>11</sup> For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, <sup>12</sup> encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his **kingdom and glory**. <sup>13</sup> And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe. <sup>14</sup> For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, <sup>15</sup> who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also **drove us out**. They displease God and are hostile to all men <sup>16</sup> in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last. <sup>17</sup> But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. <sup>18</sup> For we wanted to come to you-- certainly I, Paul, did, again and again-- but **Satan stopped us**. <sup>19</sup> For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? <sup>20</sup> Indeed, you are our glory and joy.*

As I previously mentioned, in this passage Paul feels the need to defend himself against the accusations and slander that have been leveled against him by his Jewish opponents and how that has hurt the trust that this church has in him. He pulls no punches in talking about what the Jews have done to him and the other believers in verses 14-16. Reading his defenses closely, here are some of the accusations I hear in the first six verses:

Your visit was a failure  
 Your message is false  
 Your motives are not pure  
 You are trying to trick us  
 You are not from God  
 You are trying to please men  
 You're trying to flatter us  
 You are in this for the money  
 You just want people's praise  
 You haven't returned because you don't care about us

Wow. And in response, Paul tells them:

We worked hard to earn our living and not be a burden to you

We were gentle, caring for you like a mother of little children  
 We were holy, righteous, and blameless among you  
 We encouraged and comforted you like a loving father  
 We wanted to come but experienced spiritual opposition  
 You are our glory and joy

There are times when Paul and others do not defend themselves, but this is not one of those times. He is concerned not only about his reputation but about their faith and their trust in the gospel message that he brought to them, and so he addresses and corrects the slanderous accusations. Imagine what it must have been like knowing how deeply you love these people and have poured out your heart and life for them, only to have your motives and integrity and character questioned so deeply.

This chapter brings up a really important issue that is not always expressed but is often just there below the surface when it comes to not just church but to many relationships that we have, especially with where there is some level of authority. **And that is the issue of integrity. Character.** Look again at that list of accusations against Paul:

Your visit was a failure  
 Your message is false  
 Your motives are not pure  
 You are trying to trick us  
 You are not from God  
 You are trying to please men  
 You're trying to flatter us  
 You are in this for the money  
 You just want people's praise  
 You haven't returned because you don't care about us

The bottom line is that they are questioning Paul's integrity, questioning whether his motives are pure. Have you ever found yourself wondering or assuming these things about me, or about another pastor or spiritual leader in your life? Ever questioned the motives, wondering if the pastor or leader is really in this for the right reasons, with pure and godly motives, or if they are peddling a message for profit, or to gain the praise of people, or to have power over others, or using their position to take advantage of people? **I don't know, I just don't trust the way that guy looks, or the way he talks...** Ever wonder if they really believe the words they are saying, or if they really care about the people they have been charged with

leading or pastoring? Yes, there are often questions about the message that is being shared from the pulpit, but **there are also questions about the person behind the pulpit sharing the message**. Can I trust you? What are your motives, really? Are you who you claim to be? Do you believe the words that you are speaking? Does your life match your words?

It doesn't help that every year there seems to be another prominent pastor or leader falling into some kind of sin, or sometimes even pastors from churches you've attended. Every time a person's private life proves their public life to be a fraud, everyone's suspicions get heightened.

I certainly feel the weight of these questions as I read this chapter and as I prepared for this sermon. There is a quote by Robert Murray M'Cheyne that is particularly poignant to me: "*My people's greatest need is my personal holiness.*" It's a reminder of just how vital integrity and character are to being a pastor.

But if you call yourself a believer, or if you have a position of leadership or authority in any realm, you will have people watching your life. Observing your character. Testing your integrity. Seeing if you are who you claim to be. If you believe the words you are speaking. If your life matches your words. If you can be trusted.

Integrity and character are critical to your life and relationships. **You can fool people for awhile with techniques and games and methods, but in the end, your character and integrity, or lack thereof, will be revealed.** That is why this passage is essential.

Let me share four things we learn from this passage about how to live with integrity as a Christian:

### 1) Live to please God

<sup>3</sup> *For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you.* <sup>4</sup> *On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.* <sup>5</sup> *You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed-- God is our witness.* <sup>6</sup> *We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.*

The issue of integrity often comes down to the question of who you are when no one is looking. And the answer to that question can often depend upon whether or not you think there is a God who is looking when no one else is looking. And I don't mean a God looking to punish you, like Santa Claus "he sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake." No, I mean recognizing you're your entire life is lived before God, **coram deo** as the latin phrase goes, in God's presence. God is omnipresent, and when you understand the gospel and have been transformed by His love and all you want to do is to honor Him, to live for the praise of His glory. Your life's foremost desire is to honor Him, and it does not matter who else is around or how others are treating you.

*1 Corinthians 10:31 - So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*

I remember someone who did not believe asking me once if my wife was jealous because I loved God more than her. The answer is no – I love her better when God is my first love. When God is my first love, I won't put unrealistic expectations on my wife that only God can truly meet. And most importantly, when God is my first love, then when I think she doesn't deserve my love or respect, He still deserves my respect. He still deserves that I honor Him by loving her.

Who are you when no one is looking? It depends upon whether you think there is a God who is looking when no one else is looking. Live your entire life Coram Deo, in His presence, under His authority, and for His glory, and you will be a person of integrity and character.

## 2) Love people, don't use them

*<sup>6</sup> We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, <sup>7</sup> but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. <sup>8</sup> We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. <sup>9</sup> Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the **gospel of God to you**. <sup>10</sup> You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. <sup>11</sup> For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, <sup>12</sup> encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.*

If you want to be a person of integrity, pay attention to your relationships with people and whether you are loving them or using them, whether you are in it for their good or for what they can do for you. Paul likens himself in this passage to both a mother and a father. Think of a healthy relationship between a parent and a child. **Who has children for what they can do for them?** You give, you sacrifice, and you don't count the cost. Being a parent is not about what they can do for you, but what you can do for them. Paul tells them that he worked hard to not be a burden to them, even to the point of earning his own money and not taking money from them. He wanted to be clear that he was not using them, but loving them.

I take a salary, but I also make a point of not looking at how much people give. I don't want that to ever be a factor in how much attention I give someone. Nor do I want to use people for what they can do to build up the church. I want to love and serve regardless of what people do or give.

The world is full of people who are using you for their own gain. Showing you attention so that you will give them money or business or attention or sex or influence or service. People who connect with you because of what you can do for them. They are using you for their own personal gain, and when you are no longer of use to them, they will quickly end the relationship. Not so with the gospel and with followers of Jesus. The person of integrity and character loves people and does not use them. They are willing to sacrifice for the good of others. They are willing to suffer for what they believe in, for those that they love.

Look at how Paul ends the passage:

*1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 - For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.*

You are our crown, our glory, our joy. You are the reward. That is love.

### 3) Live openly with others

Be open and honest with at least one other person.

<sup>8</sup> *We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.*

If you want to live a life of integrity, walk in the open with others. Do not walk in the darkness. He repeats “you know” a lot – you know how we lived among you. You know we never used flattery. He walked in the open, not hiding from them. And that helped him defend himself against the slanderous accusations leveled against him. Walk in the open with others:

*1 John 1:6-7 - If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. <sup>7</sup> But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*

Walk in the light with others, and when you do something that goes against integrity and character, confess it to someone you trust:

*James 5:16 - Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*

Live your life Coram Deo, in His presence, to please Him. Pay attention to how you relate to people, that you are loving them and not using them. And live openly with each other, not hiding your sin but walking in the light, confessing your sin.

#### 4) Make the gospel your life's message

*<sup>13</sup> And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*

Now let's talk about the message we believe and share as Christians, because a lack of integrity can often show up here as well. Paul uses the Greek word for herald – kerosso - in this passage. Paul see himself as a herald preaching the gospel. **The job description of a herald is to faithfully proclaim a message from the king without changing it.** And we preach and share the Christian message with integrity when we preach the unadulterated gospel, not dressed up or embellished in any way.

As Paul said, the gospel is not the word of men but the word of God, and so we don't need to dress it up. You ever wonder - how is it possible that Paul and the other early church leaders were so successful in building the church and converting millions to Jesus without Instagram or branding, without smoke machines or someone playing the keyboard behind him quietly while he gave the invitation?

It's because they knew that the Word of God does not need to be dressed up. It is powerful as it is. And that is why he did not have to resort to tricks or manipulation.

*Hebrews 4:12 - For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

I have done this long enough to know that the fastest way to build a church, not to mention build wealth, is to preach a health and wealth gospel that teaches that God wants you to be rich and healthy and successful, to use words like favor and increase and breakthrough as often as possible. That's what people want to hear, that God is going to turn things around and bring you that miracle and get you that promotion. But that is not the gospel. Even in this passage, you read:

*1 Thessalonians 2:2 - We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.*

To follow Christ and to preach the unadulterated gospel of Jesus' death for sinners and our need to repent of our self-centeredness and trust Him as our Lord and Savior will not be popular, and it will involve suffering. It did not lead to a life of health and wealth for Paul, and it will most likely not result in that for you as well. But that's okay, because knowing God now and forever is greater than worldly health and wealth.

If you want to be a person of integrity, preach the plain gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. Resist manipulation. Do not resort to sales tactics. **People can see through those.** Preach the gospel and trust the Holy Spirit to do His work.

And lastly, make the gospel not only the message you preach but the message you believe for yourself. **Because we have all failed to live lives of integrity.** We have all given people reason to question our character. But if you have failed, there is good news. Go back to the gospel.

*1 John 1:8-9 - If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

There is forgiveness. There is grace.



***Ephesians 2:8-9** - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- <sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast.*

Receive His salvation, His Spirit, and commit to living your life Coram Deo, in His presence, to bring Him glory.