

## A COMPANIONED JOURNEY

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Pastor Kim Morrison

Three companions—Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy have sent a small fledgling and struggling church a travelog offering guidance on the journey of life.

First and foremost, they remind the Thessalonians of their companionship with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. The Thessalonians are all new followers of Jesus and they need to understand how to companion God, how to companion each other and how to companion the world in which they live.

In past weeks we have considered three themes that have emerged from the letter to the Thessalonians.

**Resistance**—by imitating the Lord and Paul the Thessalonians become a zone of resistance to the culture in which they are planted. As a result, a counter cultural church is formed where people companion each other in the midst of extreme diversity of race, gender, ethnicity and status.

**Repentance**—by turning to God from idols the companions serve together and wait for God's Son from heaven—Jesus who rescues them from the coming wrath.

**Resilience**—this new little community in Thessalonica is in the midst of affliction and much conflict. How do they continue in healthy patterns of resistance and repentance? They lean into their companions, consider the fruit of their past labors together and hold fast to their identity; their life is hid in God.

Today, the travel companions will offer the Thessalonians another crucial clue about how to journey. They will remind them that they must **rest** in the approval of God.

Listen to the text,

“For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. <sup>6</sup> Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ, instead we were like infants among you.”

As you listen to this text what do you hear the companions saying? Some theologians hear this as a defensive statement. Paul is thought to be defending himself against the Thessalonians’ wrong opinions of Paul. This is a possibility, but there is nothing else in the letter to suggest in any way that the Thessalonians are questioning Paul’s motives or that of his companions.

Two other things do become evident throughout the letter.

1. Paul writes, “Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you.” Paul has recently heard word of how they remember him with kindness and long to see him.
2. Paul writes, “we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith”, Paul knows there are gaps in their understanding of the faith and he is deeply desirous of filling those gaps.

So—why this section?

Just a little earlier in the letter Paul had said this,

“You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. <sup>6</sup> And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achai”

The Thessalonian companions have become imitators of Paul.

Could it be that Paul is reminding them of the way that he, Sylvanus and Timothy approached their ministry in Thessalonica so that they could be aware of the internal workings of the heart that are necessary to be faithful ministers of the Gospel?

What kind of men were Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy when they were among the Thessalonians? Why did they come in the first place? What did their appeal to the Thessalonians spring from? Why did they urge them to turn to God from the idols all around them?

Paul explains why in this text. Paul in a very vulnerable and authentic manner discloses the motivations that catalyzed the mission trip that brought this little group of companions to Thessalonica to preach the gospel.

In the verses we read there are many false motives for preaching the gospel—which we shall consider. However, the central theme of the text is this statement: “Just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel—so we speak.”

This group of companions knew that they had been approved by God to be entrusted with the very words of God.

Wow! That is an incredible statement. They had been approved by God, and entrusted by God with the words of God.

The word appeal in our English text comes from the Greek word *paraklesis*—meaning a summons or an entreaty.

The companions were summoning and entreating the Thessalonians to turn to God.

They were absolutely confident in making this appeal and in bringing the gospel because they had been approved by God.

Being approved by God is both a one-time thing and a daily thing.

It is a one-time thing because when we receive the gift of salvation from God that comes to us through Jesus Christ, we also receive approval from God. We receive that approval from God because our very life is taken up into the life of God. We are now in Christ, our identity is interwoven in the identity of Christ. So, we are approved because of our relationship with Jesus.

However, being approved by God is something that must be real to us each day. In order to give the Gospel in much conflict and under affliction it was necessary for Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy to intentionally and consciously companion God each day. Only in attentiveness to God would they continually hear God's approval for them as ministers of the Gospel.

Do you know that you are approved by God to bring the good news of Jesus? Do you know it not only in your head but do you have the peace and joy of it in your heart so that you can rest in God?

Do you know that God has entrusted to you the words of life? You have been entrusted with the very words that bring the life and light and love of God to others. You are approved by God to bring those words.

Do you know you are approved by God—or do you seek the approval of people?

The word approved in the Greek, *dokimazo*, is related to the idea of testing and examining to see if something is genuine.

Paul and his companions have already been tested and examined by God. They have been approved—because they are in Christ, they have the identity of Christ, they have chosen to follow Jesus, imitate Jesus and companion Jesus. It is for this reason that they are approved—not because they have earned this approval.

Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy do not share the gospel from good motivation in order to be approved by God. Rather, they are already approved by God and this is what makes it possible for them to be rightly motivated.

Let me explain what I mean by the statement that Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy are already approved by God and this is what makes it possible for them to be rightly motivated by referencing Galatians 1:10

*“For am I now seeking the approval of people, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.”*

This text gives us a window to understand what Paul states about people pleasing in the Thessalonians text.

Paul says here—*“if I were still trying to please people”*—meaning there was a time when Paul did seek approval from people because he did not yet have the approval of God.

When Paul sought approval from people, he became a servant to their approval. He would do whatever it took to gain approval—he served his need for approval. In his past, Paul was willing to drag people off to prison for their faith—in order to win the approval of his peers and the Jewish religious system of his day.

Paul juxtaposes seeking the approval of people with seeking the approval of God by explaining the mechanism of approval seeking.

Whoever you seek approval from becomes your master. You become the servant of the person from whom you seek approval. Paul says you cannot be a servant of Christ if you are seeking approval from people. Why? Because you will have to serve the one whose approval you seek. When we are approved by Christ, we are freed from seeking the approval of others.

The approval of people will form us into slaves who are constantly people pleasing—which is a wearing and exhausting job. The approval of God is granted to us because we are in Christ. We work out of our approval, we do not work to gain approval.

In the letter to the Thessalonians, Paul is describing what it is like to be a servant of Christ. Paul and his companions carry a deep sense of approval and being entrusted by God. This is what controls their relationship with the Thessalonians -from the very beginning. In fact, it is God's approval that they live in.

It is because Paul and his companions know that this approval from God does not come from their conduct or perfect record of righteousness that they can preach the gospel. It is their confidence in God that not only brings the gospel but lives the gospel before the Thessalonians. They know that their approval from God is not related to what they can do but to what Christ has already done. This is the gospel.

They can preach the gospel—because they are resting in the gospel.

Paul and his companions are resting in the finished work of Christ on their behalf. Their salvation is complete in God—they have nothing to earn, they are not striving, and running for approval. This resting stance is an outward manifestation, evidence you might say of the power of the gospel, of the salvation they have already received.

Salvation from working to earn their salvation from God, salvation from the chasing, the running and the sense of never arriving that plagues our own culture today.

Paul is not consumed with pleasing people. This makes him a very free person. He is free to follow Jesus because he is not a servant of other people's opinions.

In this verse 3, Paul shows us what people pleasing looks like:

1. "Our appeal does not spring from error," *plane* - to wander or stray about, led away from the right path. People pleasing makes us pursue paths that wander from the right path. We seek to find ways or paths that will make others pleased with us.
2. "Our appeal does not spring from impure motives," *akatharsia* - motives that are not mixed with other things.
3. When we wander from the right path, the path of serving Christ alone, and our motives become mixed with other things—other than the approval of God those other things are in their essence an "attempt to deceive" *dolos* - meaning craftiness and guile.

We are deceiving people when we are seeking to please them rather than God. I say this because in people-pleasing, we are not actually about the other person—we are about ourselves. We are seeking the approval our soul needs to feel whole, complete, accepted and loved. When we do this, we are not seeking the best interest of the other; we are seeking our own best interest. We are in the relationship due to our hunger for approval.

When Paul says he is not seeking to please, *aresko* others, the word *aresko* means to accommodate one's self to the opinions and desires and interests of others.

The danger here is evident. When we come with the gospel, we call people to repent,

we call people to become a zone of resistance to the opinions and desires and interests of others that do not align with God's opinions, desires and interests (inasmuch as those are disclosed to us in Scripture).

If you are seeking to please people then you are a servant to people and you cannot preach the Gospel—because the gospel tells us the truth about ourselves—that we fall short of the glory of God, that we need to give up our self-salvation project and fall at the feet of Jesus. To many people the message of the gospel is not pleasing at all. In fact, it is offensive. We will never give the gospel if we are seeking to please people. Even though it is the good news that will deliver them from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's dear son—we will not give them the gospel if we need their approval. Because the risk of disapproval will be great and it is the risk of disapproval that holds us captive to seeking approval as a way of life.

Resting in the approval of God is difficult. We live in a therapeutic culture—where everyone is seeking the approval of others. We live in a Twitter/X, Instagram, Facebook, Slack culture—where we are checking for hearts and thumbs-up all the time.

Integrity is a quality that emerges from people who know they are approved by God and entrusted with the words of God. Integrity means that a person is who they are no matter who is present. No matter where you push into that person's life—you find the same stuff.

The word integrity comes from the same root word as integration or dis-integration. One of the most significant questions you can ask yourself, and the question of this text—is actually this: What is your life integrated around? To be an integrated person is to have all the separate pieces of who you are in alignment around one integrating factor. To be dis-integrated is to have your parts flying everywhere.

We all begin as dis-integrated people. To be dis-integrated is another way to say that we are sinners—we are people who are marked by a falling-apartness. That is what



happened in Eden. Originally the human person's whole life was integrated around a single integrating source—God. All of who a person was revolved around that one magnetic source. Think of all the parts of who a person is as if they are the planets of our solar system. The Sun due to its magnetism and gravitational force is what keeps all the planets in orbit around it and all the planets a correct distance from each other.

Human persons were made in such a way that all the pieces of who we are as a human person find their ability to function cohesively in one source - God. As long as we are in an appropriate relation with God we are rightly integrated as a human person.

When humans chose not to make God their center of gravity and center of their life then all the pieces of who they were flew apart into space—so to speak—each seeking a home, a center, a place to belong. We became less and less whole people and more and more fractured selves—called in many directions and disordered in our loves. We had no gravitational pull to keep us in alignment with God and our created purposes. This disordering and fracturing increases over time as we find ourselves pulled in multiple directions, centering parts of who we are on different narratives, different ideas, different opinions—often this fracturing and disorientation is related to seeking to please multiple people in our lives and so becoming slaves to multiple masters—so many that sometimes we lose connection with who we actually are.

This disintegration and falling-apartness is directly related to the source of our approval. When we wander away from God in error from the right path, when we do not have pure motives, but our motives are mixed and fractured into many pieces and places the natural outcome is that we become deceivers. We are one person with parents, one person with our spouse, one person with friends, one person with colleagues, one person at church, and one person in front of the computer screen. Fractured and lacking integrity we find ourselves completely disoriented with disordered loves and we may even lose connection with who we are at our core. This falling-apartness and disorientation occurs because we are serving so many masters and trying to please so many people who demand different things from us. It leads to much teen rebellion,

marital break-down, workaholism, substance abuse, stressed and distressed lives, hurry and worry.

Jesus says: rest. You are approved by God. He has entrusted you with his word.

Paul identifies some of the ways that people who do not know they are approved by God tend to behave.

Verse 5, Flattery = *kolakeia*

Flattering discourse—a fawning person. Saying things to gain the approval of others.

Greed, *pleonexia* - a desire to have more, avarice, extortion, fraud. Ultimately greed is an outcome of not being approved and seeking a means whereby you self-soothe and feel you have proven your worth or you self-elevate by showing others what you are worth.

Glory, *doxa* - a good opinion or judgment or estimate. People notice you and approve of who you are.

And finally, Paul also talks about authority or power and how this relates to being approved by God.

Paul says that even though they are apostles of Christ—referencing himself, Timothy and Sylvanus—and had authority—*dynamai*, they did not assert this over the Thessalonians. Authority is to have power by virtue of one's own ability and resources or based on permission from another.

By this statement Paul is not stating that he did not use his apostolic authority to preach the gospel. Paul is not stating that he did not use his apostolic authority to teach them how to order the church, or understand the teaching of Jesus. In the context of this text,

Paul is referencing using his authority or power to personally gain from his relationship with them. Paul came to serve not to be served. Paul used his authority as a person of integrity. Paul's gravitational center is Jesus Christ. Paul was seeking to order his loves correctly, to not be a fractured person who wandered away from the right path, with impure motives, seeking approval from multiple sources which led to a fracturing of who he was—and quite naturally to being a person who is deceitful.

Paul did not try to please people with flattery, for the purpose of greed or so that he could gain glory. Instead, Paul used his authority to give the gospel—not only with the words of God that were entrusted to him, but also by who he was as a person among them. A person of integrity whose whole self revolved around one great source of approval; one great center of gravity who is Jesus Christ.

Paul explains what the opposite of all this people pleasing looks like when he says “We could have made demands as apostles of Christ but we proved to be *nepios* among you.” *Nepios* is the Greek word for an infant, a little child. What does it mean to be an infant among others?

In our culture we identify and treat infants very differently than infants in the Greco-Roman empire. In the Greco-Roman empire infants were not considered to be fully formed people. Their level of care was based on their social status. Fathers had the power to accept their children and raise them or to demand their exposure. Meaning fathers had the right to have their infants placed in the elements so that they could die due to exposure to weather or to wild animals. Infants might also be collected from where they were left to die so that they could become a source of income, especially for slaves. Slaves sold them to brothels for the purpose of child sex trafficking. It is estimated that less than ½ of the children in the Greco-Roman empire lived to age 15.

These were not the practices of the Jewish people, but were typical and familiar practices of the Greco-Roman culture in which the Thessalonians lived.

When Paul referenced infants, his readers would have understood them as completely vulnerable people with absolutely no control over their lives. When Paul says they proved to be infants—it means they proved to be people who although they had rights gave up their rights for others. They did not seek to be approved by others—this left them incredibly vulnerable to the whims of the people around them. When you are not constantly seeking to please people, they can become displeased with you. If they become displeased with you, they can influence and turn others to also be displeased with you. This leaves you vulnerable, and one might even say exposed.

Only people who know they are approved by God and entrusted with the words of life can have the courage to enter into relationships with people who may choose to expose them if they are not pleased with them. Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy chose not to be people pleasers, they found their approval from God even in a setting of much conflict, difficult oppression, and having been recently deeply wounded and injured in ministry.

Paul's recounting of how he brought the Gospel to the Thessalonians would have been completely counter-cultural. If the Thessalonians were to imitate Paul—they would have needed to resist cultural norms. Rome had an Emperor cult where everyone was meant to please Rome and specifically the emperor. The whole culture was based on a system of patronage where one needed to please the wealthy so one could find patrons to become protectors in a violent and cruel nation.

The Thessalonians would need to resist cultural norms and rest only in the approval of God.

The culture of our day differs in many ways from Greco-Roman culture. But there are also many similarities. We are also a culture of patronage—being part of the right tribe, subscribing to the right channels, podcasts, groups—is what gives us a sense of belonging and approval. We are also part of a culture that is rife with gossip, slander, false accusation and deceit. As a matter of fact, participating in these behaviors with others is often part of people-pleasing.

How can we be like infants—allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, having full integrity, not allowing ourselves to be fractured in many directions by constant people-pleasing? This is only possible if we take deeply into our heart the image of another infant. He left heaven to come to earth. He left the glory and beauty and purity of heaven where he was the Beloved of God—and his identity was never at risk and he came to this earth as an infant. He entered a world of darkness, corruption, and evil in a cultural moment when many infants would not survive and where he had no power, no authority, no control. The infant Jesus needed a mother to feed him, a father to protect him, wise men from the East to provide means for financial stability and shepherds to worship him.

The infant Jesus was completely vulnerable—in a world shrouded by darkness, sin and death. Jesus became an infant so that he could become the good news of our planet. His complete vulnerability and his unwillingness to please people eventually led to his murder. People became so angry at his message and his unswerving commitment to justice and truth that they killed him. In his death he was victor over sin, death and hell—so that we can have victory over our need to please people. In his death his side was ripped open with a spear and out gushed the blood and water that would become the womb of the church—the place of our origin. Our very life as companions with God and each other took place as a result of Jesus refusing to exchange pleasing people with pleasing God. Jesus refused to exchange the message of “Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand” with news that people could be content where they are, did not need total transformation and just needed to add Jesus to their lives. The message of Jesus is a call for radical commitment to a way of being and a way of life that transforms culture—and first and foremost transforms the culture of our own hearts.

We can become like infants and bring good news to our planet—when we rest in the truth that we are fully approved by God and he has entrusted us with the words of life.