

2. Integrity in Gospel Work

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn up our passage again, if we may. 1 Thessalonians 2, page 986.

Now, friends, I want to start off this evening by testing your Bible knowledge and by asking a simple historical question about Paul's initial visit to Thessalonica, just to see what has gone in.

Over the years, I'm going to give you a choice of three, and I want you to raise your hand on number one, if you think number one is the right answer, number two, if you think two, and number three, if you think three. Okay? So my question is, how long did Paul's initial visit to Thessalonica, his evangelizing visit, last?

And here are your three options. Option number one is 18 months. Option number two is six months. And option number three is one month.

Okay? So 18 months, six months, one month. Hands up, those who think it was option number one, 18 months. Hands down.

[1 : 11] Thank you very much. Hands up, those who think it was six months. Option number two. Hands down. Hands down. Thank you very much. And hands up, those who think it was a month or thereabouts.

Whoa! Hands down. Thank you very much. Yes, well, you've got it right, most of you. The answer is just a few weeks. We learn from Acts chapter 17 that when Paul went to Thessalonica with Silas and Timothy, his fellow missionaries, they spent initially just three Sabbaths speaking in the synagogue there.

And then they had to move out with the number of folk who'd become Christians. And then they may have held meetings for a few more weeks elsewhere. We don't quite know. It was perhaps four to six weeks that they spent there.

But after this very short time, they simply had to leave. They were put under such pressure by the citizens of Thessalonica and the city officials that they had to go.

So Paul's missionary safari to Thessalonica lasted for that very short time. And that, to Paul, was a big problem. You see, how could Paul, in just a month or six weeks, teach these baby Christians, who'd had no contact with the gospel before, everything they needed to know if they were going to be established as an up-and-running church?

[2 : 33] Many of us have been learning the Bible and the Christian faith for decades. And we still have so much to learn, don't we? We can be sure that Paul the Apostle would gladly have stayed six or even twelve months so as to get these baby Christians out of the first class, at least into the second class.

But he wasn't given the chance. He had to leave. And if he'd not left, there might well have been a bloodbath. Look at the way he puts it here in chapter 2, verse 17.

But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person, not in heart, we endeavoured the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you.

I, Paul, again and again. But Satan hindered us. So what did he do to remedy this difficult situation, or at least to help it? Well, the first thing he did was to send Timothy back to Thessalonica, as he says in chapter 3, verse 2, to establish them and exhort them.

But also, as he puts it in chapter 3, verse 5, so as to learn about their faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labour would be in vain.

[3 : 48] Now, it's easy to trace from Acts chapter 17 and from the first three chapters of this letter exactly what happened. Paul and Timothy and Silas, they'd left Philippi.

They'd journeyed across to Thessalonica and spent their short time there. They then went further west to the city of Berea, which is still in northern Greece. Then Paul went south to Athens, where

he spent just a short time, and then on to Corinth.

And Timothy had joined him in the meantime, and Paul then sent Timothy back to Thessalonica so as to strengthen the church and find out the news, see if they were standing firm. Why, you might ask, did Paul not go back to Thessalonica himself?

The answer almost certainly is because he was now engaged in his work at Corinth. It was the early days of his mission there, and he simply couldn't break off his work. So Timothy went back to Thessalonica.

He stayed there a short time, encouraged them and taught them, and then returned to Paul with the good news, the welcome news, as we read in chapter 3, verse 6, that the Thessalonians were standing firm.

[4 : 55] Timothy has brought us, says Paul, the good news of your faith and love. And it's then, after Timothy's welcome return, that Paul writes this letter to them, so as to give them further teaching and encouragement, to make up, in a small way, for his absence.

So Paul's purpose in writing this letter is abundantly clear. He wants to establish and make firm this very young church, and to strengthen it against the buffetings of Satan and of men.

Now, in chapter 1, which we looked at last week, Paul is saying to the Thessalonians, God really has chosen you. Don't doubt that you're Christians.

Don't think that nothing has happened to you. And Paul insists on this by pointing to the evidence of the radical change demonstrated in their own lives. He points out how their lives are now characterized by faith and love and hope, the hallmarks of real Christianity.

How the gospel came to them, not just as a load of empty words, but with power, with the conviction brought about by the Holy Spirit. How they were then prepared to suffer affliction.

[6 : 07] That was persecution at the hands of their own fellow citizens. And how it was now known all across Greece that they had turned their lives through 180 degrees. They'd abandoned their pagan idols, and they'd turned now to the living and true God, and to wait for his son Jesus from heaven, who comes to deliver them from the wrath to come.

So in chapter 1, he's saying to them, the transformation of your lives testifies to the reality of your conversion. People's lives are not changed in the way that your lives have been changed unless they really have become Christians.

Now in chapter 2, his underlying aim is still the same. He's still wanting to encourage them and to reassure them. But he comes at it from a slightly different angle.

In chapter 1, he's saying the gospel is true, and you really are Christians because your changed lives demonstrate it. But in chapter 2, he is saying the gospel is true, and you really can trust it because our lives demonstrate it.

My life and Timothy's and Silas's. In chapter 1, the focus is on their lives, the Thessalonians' lives. But in chapter 2, the focus is on Paul's life and the life of his co-workers in mission.

[7 : 26] In chapter 1, you'll notice the dominant pronoun is you. But in chapter 2, the dominant pronoun is we. So why should Paul turn to speak at some length about his work, his methods and his motives?

Is he crowing? Is he blowing his own trumpet? For Paul wasn't that kind of man. Almost certainly, he's writing like this because his opponents at Thessalonica were bad-mouthing him.

And for the sake of the young Christians, he's having to defend himself against their poisonous accusations. Now, just remember what happened when Paul made his initial visit to Thessalonica. His gospel preaching led to riots and uproar in the city. The Jews, who were not converted to Christ, and we can, I think, imagine that was the majority of the synagogue, they angrily opposed him, just as he himself had once been an angry opponent of the gospel.

And what had happened in the intervening months in Thessalonica? Well, those hostile Jews who lived there, they were still in the synagogue at Thessalonica. And how do you think they were relating to their own friends and neighbours and relatives who had become Christians?

[8 : 43] With fierce antagonism. Benji, if you don't come back to the synagogue, it will be the death of your grandmother. That sort of thing. The pressures could have been physical as well as emotional.

Benji, if you stay with those Christians, I might have to break your legs. What sort of things do you think they were saying about Paul? Paul, who was, of course, a Jew.

Traitor to the faith of Abraham and Moses. Charlatan. Flatterer. Only in it for the money. Don't you believe a word from that snake Paul? Of course they were saying that kind of thing. They didn't live in the 21st century, where empty-headed people say that Judaism and Christianity are really the same kind of thing. They weren't so silly as that. They knew that the two were incompatible.

And Paul knew that hostile people at Thessalonica would be saying all this. And he knew that the criticisms directed at him and Silas and Timothy might be undermining the determination of these young Christians to keep going as Christians.

[9 : 49] Because criticism can have that kind of drip-drip effect. So what is Paul doing in these first 12 verses of chapter 2? He is saying to the Thessalonians, I wonder if you noticed as I read the passage that Paul several times says, you know, or as you know.

So he is appealing to their knowledge, to their memory of his visit. Just look with me at the verses. Verse 1, for you yourselves know brothers. Verse 2, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know.

Verse 5, we never came with words of flattery, as you know. Verse 9, for you remember brothers, our labor and toil. And verse 10, you are witnesses, and God also, how blameless our conduct was. And verse 11, for you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted you. It's very striking, isn't it? Now why does he write like this? He's saying to them, Our opponents are besmirching our reputation with all manner of criticisms.

But you know, because you remember, you know that those criticisms are untrue. Because you observed our conduct. You understood our motives. It was no time ago that we were with you.

[11 : 30] Your memory of our visit is still very fresh. And your memory testifies against the wretched misrepresentations of our critics. Now just to stand back from this for a moment.

I don't know about you, but my initial reaction to reading these verses was to feel just a little bit uncomfortable. I think I found myself wishing that Paul didn't have to be so defensive, so self-justifying.

Part of me wanted to say, Paul, brother, relax. Be a bit more laid back about these criticisms. Let them be like water off a duck's back to you. Of course people are going to take pot shots at your work.

Let them shoot at you. The Lord is your helper, isn't he? Can't you trust him to vindicate you and to take care of your reputation? But no, that reaction on my part won't do.

The Lord raised up Paul as an exemplary gospel worker. An example to follow. So if I start taking issue with Paul about his methods, then I'm a fool.

[12 : 34] These words are here to teach you and me how to be gospel workers. So what we need to learn is that there are certain circumstances when gospel workers need to justify themselves and their work in the face of criticism and need to defend the reputation of their work.

So why does Paul feel that he needs to defend himself here? Well, it's not primarily for the sake of his own reputation. At one level, Paul knows perfectly well that he's going to be called a traitor to Judaism and a religious maverick and so on.

As he puts it in 1 Corinthians, he knows that he and his fellow apostles will be called the scum of the earth, the off-scouring of the world. And at that level, he doesn't mind.

After all, he knows that his master was called Beelzebub. So he's not really concerned about his reputation so far as it has a bearing upon him. But what he is concerned about is these young, tender Thessalonian Christians.

If they hear Paul and Silas and Timothy being called charlatans and deceivers and religious troublemakers, and if they begin to believe that they are, then these young Christians are in danger of abandoning not only Paul, but Jesus.

[13 : 53] And that's a risk that Paul is not prepared to take. That's why he defends himself and his work amongst them. He wants them to be able to trust his integrity so that they will fully trust the integrity of his message and the integrity of Jesus.

Paul and Jesus are inextricably bound up together. If the Thessalonians can't trust Paul, they won't trust Jesus. And incidentally, friends, it's just the same today.

If we are not prepared to trust Paul, whom Jesus commissioned as his own mouthpiece and apostle, then we will end up at variance with Jesus.

And that's no place for a Christian to be at. Those who depart from Paul will, in the end, depart from Jesus too. All right, well, let's look a bit more closely at the text and see what it is about his work that Paul defends.

And as we see the integrity of Paul's work, it will help us to see what gospel work ought to look like in every generation. So that's really our subject for this evening, the importance of integrity in gospel work.

[15:02] So let's notice three things about Paul's work, or strictly speaking, the work of Paul and Silas and Timothy. First, they were brave preachers, not frightened off by suffering.

This is what verse 2 is all about. I'll read it again. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.

Now that verse you'll see speaks of not one, but two bouts of suffering. The first at Philippi and the second at Thessalonica. And Paul's mission to Philippi, which is recorded in Acts chapter 16, immediately preceded his mission to Thessalonica, recorded in Acts 17.

So what is this suffering and shameful treatment that Paul says happened to him at Philippi? Well, Luke tells us in Acts 16, Paul and Silas were beaten with rods in public at the orders of the town magistrates, although they had not been tried or condemned in a court of law.

They were then thrown into prison and their feet were fastened in the stocks. They were then wonderfully released. There was an earthquake, which obviously the Lord sent.

[16:23] And the jailer, now converted, washed their wounds and fed them and looked after them. But what did Paul and Silas then do? They left Philippi, their backs still lacerated from their beating, and they journeyed straight to Thessalonica and immediately started preaching again.

Now don't you think that's remarkable? No wonder Calvin writes of Paul's unconquerable mental courage and indefatigable endurance of the cross.

I've been preaching the gospel now for many years and I've not received one lash from one whip. Not one. And if I ever did, I'd probably burst into tears and ask for a month's holiday to get over my trauma. These men meant business.

With lacerated backs, they went on to Thessalonica and they preached this message which they knew would probably bring exactly the same kind of treatment to them. Not that they were actually physically roughed up at Thessalonica, but they were expelled from the city.

[17:32] Now doesn't that kind of determination speak of the integrity of their work? Do quacks and gold diggers behave like that? Of course they don't. Not that Paul awards himself any gold stars for bravery.

Not at all. Look at the way he expresses it in verse 2. We had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel in the midst of much conflict. He's not claiming that his boldness originates in himself. He's not like Sylvester Stallone taking off his shirt and rippling his muscles and saying, who's a big boy then? No. He says we had boldness in our God.

So the flack is flying around Paul's head, but there he is standing there preaching the gospel and drawing his strength and his boldness from the great heavenly reservoir, not from the little puddle of his own heart.

Now that is gospel ministry with integrity. And in the providence of God, these words were written down, not just for the Thessalonians in 50 AD, but to teach and inspire us in 2008.

[18:40] God has recorded these words for us to show us what gospel ministry is really like. Now you might be sitting there saying to yourself, come on Edward, this teaching is for ministers, isn't it?

It's not for the foot soldiers of the Christian church. This is the kind of material that needs to be opened up at a minister's training conference, not at a regular Sunday evening service of the Lord's people. Well brother, if that's what you're thinking, hold your horse.

Who was this letter written to? Just look back to chapter 1, verse 1. It's not written to the leaders of the church, of the Thessalonians, it's written to the church, all its members.

So this second chapter here is for Granny Jacobs and Grandpa Solomons and Auntie Rachel from number 37 around the corner, as well as for the pastors and elders. And why does the whole church need to hear about Christian ministry and leadership?

Because the whole church is on the receiving end of it week after week. And the whole church needs to know that its leaders are living according to apostolic standards. You need to have confidence that the church you belong to is led well.

[19 : 54] You need to be able to distinguish between good, faithful leadership and poor or fraudulent leadership. There's plenty of that around in the churches today. Poor leadership and worse.

The kind of leadership that will lead churches up the garden path and bring the gospel into disrepute. Now all of us need to be able to distinguish the real thing from imitations. Because when we know what good Christian leadership looks like, we can pray for our leaders and we'll know what to pray for. We can support and encourage our leaders. We can select the new kind of leaders, new leaders, when the need arises because we'll know what sort of leaders we're looking for.

And then we can train potential future leaders in the right way according to Paul's standards. And that's perhaps been a slight digression, but we need to see why Paul writes all this to the whole church membership and not simply to the ministers and elders at Thessalonica.

So to get back to our first point, Paul and his colleagues were brave preachers not frightened off by suffering. They didn't turn and run when trouble came their way.

[21 : 07] They had such a burning conviction of the truth of the gospel and such a sense of the urgency of getting the gospel out into the world that they were prepared to risk great bodily pain as well as insults and venomous hatred.

As Paul puts it in verse 2, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. And Christian leaders in the apostolic mould have been prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to broadcast the good news of Christ to a world under the wrath of God.

So brave preachers not frightened off by suffering. Then second, Paul is saying we were sincere preachers not flatterers or men-pleasers.

Now this is Paul's subject from the beginning of verse 3 till halfway through verse 6. And if you look over that section, you'll see that it's full of denials. Paul is denying no less than seven things which could act as the motives behind a Christian preacher's ministry.

Look with me at these seven things that he denies. In verse 3, he denies that he's motivated by error. That's the first denial. By impurity. That's the second.

[22 : 30] By deceitfulness. That's the third. In verse 4, he denies that he's motivated by the desire to please men. That's his fourth denial. In verse 5, that he's motivated by the wish to flatter.

That's denial number 5. Or by greed. Number 6. That, by the way, is greed for money, not for fish and chips. And finally, in verse 6, he denies that he's been seeking glory from people.

That's denial number 7. And in the midst of these seven denials, there is one affirmation. And there it is in the middle of verse 4.

The one thing that motivates Paul, Silas, and Timothy is the desire to please God who tests our hearts. Now, you might want to say, but why on earth should Paul, or any minister in the 21st century, for that matter, want to flatter people or deceive them or seek glory from them?

Well, to illustrate that, just imagine that you're a young man, youngish man, and you've been appointed as the new minister of a church somewhere in the suburbs of Glasgow, somewhere like Strathbongo or Cathcart, somewhere down in the jungles of the south side.

[23 : 52] And this church, and this is true of many Church of Scotland parishes, it has a very mixed congregation. There are Bible-believing converted people there, but there are others who are not, and yet they come to church regularly.

Well, there you are, you're the new minister, you're appointed in, you're welcomed in, and initially, this welcome is just lovely. There's a great parish feast laid on, pork pies and chocolate mousses, and the senior elder, a smiling man with silver hair, stands up and he makes a speech welcoming you and your family into the church, and it's a very happy occasion.

In fact, you even overhear a couple of the older ladies in the corridor outside saying after the service, and what lovely children he has, and his wife's skirt is just the right length for a minister's wife, and not too much makeup either.

So you think to yourself, well, I'm getting off on the right foot here. But the following Sunday, you have to start preaching to them, and that is when the fat can get involved with the fan.

Let's say that in your first few Sundays, you preach very clearly on the reality of sin, the necessity of conversion and the new birth, the authority and flawlessness of the Bible, the uniqueness of Christ as the only way to God, the reality of heaven and hell and judgment, the non-negotiability of Christian sexual ethics, and similar subjects that have a decided and definite profile.

[25 : 33] Well, that's the moment when you hear the fan beginning to whirr and the fat beginning to squish in it. And a delegation of church members, perhaps including a number of elders, comes to you and says, Mr. So-and-so, you need to realize that this is a traditional and inclusive parish church that you've come to.

What we need here is gentle preaching that doesn't put anybody off. We want to embrace the whole of the community here. We want affirming preaching here, not preaching that is full of denials and drawing lines.

So we'd very much appreciate it if you want to continue as our minister here with our support, if you change your preaching. The world is changing. The church has to change along with it if it's to be loving to the world.

And we have to reflect these changes in our teaching. I mean, you do realize, don't you, that we have several couples in our congregation who live together in civil partnership. as well as Professor So-and-so whose new book on comparative religion is regarded as the world leader in the subject. A minister needs to be in tune with his congregation. You realize that, don't you? Well, there you are, a young minister listening to this delegation.

[26 : 51] How do you respond to it? If you have any sensitivity, if your skin is any thinner than that of a rhinoceros, your heart is going to start beating rather rapidly at that point and you're going to get a queasy feeling in your stomach.

What are you going to say in the pulpit the following Sunday and all the Sundays after that? What are you going to write in that column where the minister writes his letter in the parish magazine? The pressure put on you by that group of disgruntled church members is going to test you to the core and you have to choose between the world's agenda which they represent and the Bible's agenda.

You cannot have it both ways. To use Paul's phrase here from verse 4, you have to decide whether you're going to please men or God. You cannot do both.

To please men in that situation is going to mean effectively abandoning the Bible. Now this is the kind of situation which Paul in a way faced at Thessalonica.

[27 : 57] He came to the synagogue at Thessalonica. Now he loved the Jewish people. It was anguish to him and we read about this in Romans chapters 9 and 10, anguish that so many of them rejected the gospel.

But Paul was not prepared to trim or dilute his gospel so as to accommodate these Jews with their twisted and blinkered understanding of the Old Testament. If he had wanted their approval, he would have had to reverse all seven of those denials in these verses.

So if he'd spoken erroneously or out of deceitfulness or impurity, if he'd spoken to please men or to flatter men, to make money, to seek glory from men, he would have been the pin-up boy of that synagogue.

They would have loved him and fated him and welcomed him and paid him a big salary and no one would have come to Christ. But Paul resisted the pressure of those who hated his gospel.

How did he manage it? How did he get the strength? Well, it's all there in verse 4. He knew that he'd been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel and therefore he wanted to please and satisfy the one who had given him this sacred and wonderful trust.

[29 : 18] He was a trustee and therefore his highest obligation was to carry out the wishes of the God who had appointed him to this responsibility and he could only do that by means of a tenacious determination to please God rather than men.

Now isn't that the kind of determined ministry that a congregation needs in its minister? Years ago down in England I worked with a fine Christian minister and preacher.

He was my senior colleague and he died very suddenly at the age of 49. And when his obituary came out in the church press a few days later the obituary writer who'd been a good friend of his wrote of him as a man of invincible determination.

Now if Christian leaders are not like that they will end up as flatterers deceivers and men-pleasers and their preaching whatever else it may include will be evacuated of the gospel.

The Bible gospel will never accommodate itself to the agenda of the world. So there's the second quality of the ministry of Paul and Silas and Timothy.

[30 : 30] They were preachers of integrity sincere preachers not flatterers or men-pleasers. And then thirdly they were loving preachers not out to make money.

In the next little section from halfway through verse 6 down to well for the next few verses Paul is contrasting the kind of religious leader whose main interest is in money with the ministry style of himself and Silas and Timothy who really did care for the Christians of Thessalonica.

Let's look at the text. I think the Greek there would be better translated in verse 6 if the full stop came in the middle of the verse rather than at the end in which case it would read like this.

Though we could have made demands financial demands on you as apostles of Christ we were gentle among you like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

so being affectionately desirous of you we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves because you had become very dear to us.

[31 : 43] Now what does he mean by that we were prepared ready to share our own selves with you? Does it mean that they were men of unbuttoned emotions who as it were showed the total contents of their inner hearts in glorious technicolor to their Christian friends?

Probably not. Look at the first word of verse 9 it's the little word for which indicates that verse 9 is unpacking and explaining verse 8. So when he says in verse 8 that we shared with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves he then tells them in verse 9 that what he really means is that he hated the idea of asking them to pay for the ministry.

Look at verse 9 for you remember brothers our labor and toil we work night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you while we proclaim to you the gospel of God.

In other words Paul made tents and leather goods he was a leather worker that was his trade and Silas and Timothy did whatever their trade might have been plumbing or fitting kitchens we don't know what they did but they did it with their hands and made some money that way so they labored night and day they had a day job they had an evening job as we might put it so while they spent those few weeks there at Thessalonica they'd have several hours a day with their bible classes and their evangelistic classes and so on and then they'd be spending several hours a day working at their trade so that they could pay for their board and lodging they hated the idea of being a financial burden to the new Christians why?

because they loved them so much they felt like a mother who cares for her young children in verse 7 and like a father who teaches and encourages his children in verse 11 do fathers and mothers expect their young children to pay the bill at Tesco's or to pay the council tax of course not if Paul and Silas and Timothy had really been out to fill their wallets at the Thessalonians expense the Thessalonians would have smelled a rat and we smell rats I hope when we come across Christian ministers who are concerned to fatten their bank balances by means of their ministry no it wasn't like that Paul loved these Thessalonian Christians they were his delight look on to the last verse verse 20 in this chapter he says to them you are our glory and joy you he says are our joy Paul cared deeply about these Christian friends and their growth to Christian maturity that's what mothers and fathers are for to bring their children up to maturity towards these

[34 : 29] Christians Paul showed the gentleness of a nursing mother and the loving discipline and encouragement of a caring father well I trust that there may be some here tonight who will one day take up a ministry of preaching and Christian leadership in some form or another how is that ministry taught and exemplified by Paul in these three ways we need first brave preachers who are not frightened off by suffering secondly sincere preachers who are not flatterers or men pleasers and thirdly loving preachers who are not out to make money that is the apostolic standard that's what the churches need so friends let's pray for it let's support it let's practice it shall we bow our heads and pray basically practice and also with others who are not active otherwise let's try to perform

Daddy tends to be happy I nothing to happen