

A Ministry Approved by God

Introduction

Can you think of a time in your life where someone ministered to you God's word or Jesus's love in a way that was wonderfully encouraging? Perhaps it was a timely visit by a pastor or GG leader. Perhaps it was one of those revolutionary conversations with your YG leader at the end of a Friday night. Perhaps it was a kind Christian co-worker who invited you into their life and ultimately led you to Christ.

There is a moment of ministry that will always stand out for me.

It was maybe around 14 years ago when I lived in a share house in MacLeod. I had developed pneumonia and had spent the night in hospital. When I arrived home the following day, I was completely wrecked. All I could do was lay down on the couch feeling sorry for myself and frustrated the house was a dump. I can still picture it now, empty packets and bottles and rubbish all over the living room floor. No one had cleaned.

And then our senior pastor arrives at the door for a visit. And I'll be honest, the first thing I think is oh no, not Neil, I can handle Andy but not Neil... I don't want my senior minister to see me lying down with all this rubbish around me, what'll he think of me?

Nevertheless, he comes in and finds me on the couch. I watched to see his reaction to the mess. To my surprise, no reaction. He then moved some junk off a chair and took a seat at which point my oblivious housemate walks past us wearing nothing but a towel.. Again he, doesn't bat an eyelid.

For the entirety of the visit I felt no judgment from Neil, just genuine care and concern for my wellbeing. I remember him explaining to me why it hurt to breath. He spoke to me kindly, prayed with me, I think he read scripture to me, he ministered to me. I knew my pastor cared in that moment and it has stuck with me.

Christian pastoral ministry is a powerful force. When it's bad it's terrible. But when it's good it's wonderful.

But it's not just senior pastors who minister to people. Many of you have likely found yourself in positions of responsibility where you teach and care for others – your YG kids, SS kids, your GG members, a friend in strife, witnessing to a new believer.

So it's important we all know what it looks like to minister to others well when we have a level of responsibility to them.

And in tonight passage God gives us an example of a good pastoral ministry in Paul and his missionary team that we can all learn from.

So what I'm going to do, is think about the slander against Paul's ministry in Thessalonica that probably led to this passage being written. And then we'll think about how Paul defends his ministry and what we can take away from that description that will help us minister to others in good way too.

Context: Paul's Ministry Slandered

So first, let's think about context of this passage. Paul's ministry slandered.

One of the interesting things about this first letter to the Thessalonians is just how much time Paul gives to defending his ministry in Thessalonica and his love for the Thessalonian believers. It takes up all of chapters 2-3 which is about 50 percent of the letter as a whole.

Now, it would appear that some who had opposed Paul and the gospel message when he first arrived in the city had continued to slander him following his departure.

We know from Acts 17:5 that there were a number of hostile Jews in Thessalonica, who we are told were jealous because a number of people within that city had decided to leave Judaism and the synagogue community to follow Christ and join the local church (Show Acts 17:5). In fact, their jealousy burned so hot that we read of them inciting a vicious mob to go get Paul and shut him down.

But even after Paul was forced out of the city by the concerned believers there, it would appear they kept up their opposition against him via a campaign of slander.

One of the best ways to destroy a message/movement that you don't like, is to discredit the messenger.

And I think, if you look at verse 3 in our passage tonight, you get a taste of the three main accusations served up against Paul and his missionary team. Listen to what he's saying their ministry was *not*.

³ *For the appeal we make does not spring from **error** or **impure motives**, nor are we **trying to trick** you.*

Paul and his team were being accused of speaking in error (saying misleading things about Jesus), coming with impure motives (morally corrupt and in it for personal gain), and trying to trick the Thessalonians (a master manipulator who knows how to win gullible townsfolk).

I've summarised their character attack on Paul in this way:

- “He’s deluded!”
- “He’s depraved!”
- “He’s devious!”

You can imagine Paul’s opponents speaking with the Thessalonian believers – “Paul and his ministry was dodgy from top to bottom – you don’t want to be a part of that do you? Come on back to the synagogue – you’ll get the truth there. You’ll be around people you can trust.”

Most of us know the pain of having someone say hurtful and untrue things about us – particular to people who are close to us. Imagine the pain of knowing *that* was being said about you. Imagine the anxiety of thinking it was having some effect on the people you love.

So how does Paul respond? He writes this passage to the Thessalonians and tells them:

“guys, think back to our time together, and let the evidence of our ministry speak for itself.”

If I could summarise Paul’s three main rebuttals to his opponents it would be like this:

- (1) “**You know...** We spoke the *truth* of the gospel.”
- (2) “**You know...** We acted with *integrity*.”
- (3) “**You know...** We loved you *deeply*.”

So lets think about the first one.

Paul's ministry defended.

1. "You know We spoke the Truth of the gospel."

Most of us hate the idea we are being lied to – particularly by those who are supposed to give us the truth. That's why the idea of *Fake News* hits such a nerve with people. The idea that journalists in the media could be reporting false information is infuriating. In Paul's day, it would appear that Paul was being labelled as a purveyor of "Fake News." He was deluded about the message of the gospel.

Paul is reassuring the Thessalonians here: "We are not deluded! And you're not deluded for believing it! This is NOT fake news. The gospel message that says Christ died for sinners and rose again and is the Lord of all and giver of life – that's true and powerful and good! I've seen him risen! And that's why we were prepared to suffer to bring it to you." Look at verse 1:

*2 You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. ² We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. ³ For the appeal we make **does not spring from error** or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. ⁴ On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.*

“Why would we keep suffering for the gospel if it wasn’t true and life-giving.” And notice that Paul points to the effects of the gospel truth on their life. Verse 1 – it didn’t come as an empty, untrue message – it was powerful. Remember chapter 1:5:

⁵ ...our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

They had not only been saved by the gospel but changed by it! The Spirit had convicted them that Jesus was worth giving up everything for. The Spirit had filled their hearts with joy because of Jesus. “Look at the evidence of your own lives!” says Paul. This was a true and life-changing message. “We don’t need the approval of man, God clearly approves of our message (v.4) – He gave us the courage to keep speaking (v.2), he provided the results (v.1).

Paul was not deluded by a false message but devoted to the truth of the gospel.

Keep the Gospel Central in your Ministry

And this reminds us that in our various contexts of ministry (YG, Kids club, our home, GG) we keep the truth of gospel central. We are not deluded in believing or teaching the message that Christ died bring people to God. We like the Thessalonians have been saved by that message, we are being changed by it. The gospel has not been without results among us.

So let’s keep it central in our ministry.

YG and SS kids don’t simply need to hear “try and be good people”, but “trust in your good saviour.” They need the gospel not simply good works.

The gospel tells the sick and grieving person you minister to that there is hope beyond the grief and pain – Jesus is with them, and is bringing about a new creation. Keep speaking the gospel.

The same is true in our conversations with people who aren't yet Christian. They need God's good truth. Our friends and family won't be reconciled to God through a message of morals nor by accepting any social or political view point we are passionate about. We keep the focus on Jesus – who is the way, the truth, the life.

One person in CE said to me at the start of the course that they would be a tough nut to crack. And at the end of the course I asked them where they were at with God. This person said: "I'm still not sure where I'm at with God [generally], but I *do* like what I see in Jesus. And of course they do. Because Jesus and what He did for us is good!

If we keep the focus on the truth of Him, on His love and compassion for sinners like us. On His mighty power. On his sacrificial death on a cross. On His promise of forgiveness and eternal life. That IS compelling. And if you're watching tonight and want to find out more about how good Jesus is – get in touch with me. Or sign up to our CE course. He is worth hearing about.

Keep the gospel central in your ministry.

2. "You know we acted with integrity."

Second. Paul responds by telling the Thessalonians, "You know we acted with integrity."

Manipulation and hidden agendas have no place in Christian ministry. And when such moments *do* occur and are brought to light, it is a tragic and shameful thing to behold.

This was certainly shown to be true in the golden age of TV evangelists. Throughout the 80's and 90s, a number of men and women claiming to be honest preachers of the word were exposed for their corruption and financial greed. These people would appear on TV segments claiming to provide a message from God's, or a blessing from God or a healing from God – if only you could donate to the number at the bottom of the screen. One televangelist was even nice enough to throw in a free sachet of miracle spring water. Needless to say, the televangelist has not had a great reputation in the wider world for a long time.

Paul, it would seem, was being put in the corrupt 'tele-evangelists' club by his opponents. Now, of course, in Paul's day, they didn't have the joy of tele-evangelism. But what they were familiar with was the itinerant philosopher... People who would wander from city to city, teaching some attractive new philosophy or religion. Passing on wisdom at a price and then moving on.

“Paul is just another fly in fly out slippery philosopher out to make a quick buck!”

But look at how Paul responds to those charges in the middle of verse 4:

...We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. [You can hear Paul's passion, “Come on! Remember how we acted among you.” ⁵ You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed— [We didn't have any self-interested

hidden agenda] *God is our witness. ⁶ We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else.*

“Where did you see us asking for money!?” You didn’t.

“Where did you see us buddying up with the well to do types among you? You didn’t.

“When did you ever hear us telling you to put your hope, your trust in us as opposed to Jesus?” You didn’t.

We acted with integrity. Our sole purpose was to pass on to you God’s life-saving message of the gospel – which we did honourably. Verse 10:

¹⁰ You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.

Paul even reminds them that he didn’t throw his weight around as an apostle. Even though he had been personally commissioned to preach the gospel by the risen Jesus, he didn’t use that authority to compel them to do or believe what he wanted.

He wasn’t like: “You know that I’m the *apostle* Paul right? Kind of a big deal.”

No, because he had godly integrity we read in verse 6:

..even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. ⁷ Instead, we were like young children^[a] among you. That is, there was no attitude of superiority that was being abused here. Paul likens his team to children – who have no ability to influence or compel.

“In our ministry among you, we acted with integrity.”

Paul’s words here remind us that we need to keep watch on our lives in ministry.

In 1 Tim 4:16 Paul reminds Timothy that he is not only to watch his doctrine (what he teaches) but his life (how he lives) – and it’s through both that he will save himself and his hearers.

How we live matters to God. Our motives in ministry matter to God. We don’t sign up to serve in YG or Kid’s club or any other ministry to win favour or credibility from others. We do it because the gospel is worth sharing. We love and serve because Christ first loved and served us.

Our conduct matters to God. If you’re a leader in a ministry, be careful you don’t use your influence or charisma (if you have any) to attract people to yourself – we want people attracted to Jesus. Be careful not to abuse your position of authority in any way.

I was recommended a book during my college years on the dangers of pastoral ministry. It speaks of helpful things like living with godly integrity. And it’s very good actually. But the awkward thing about this book is the endorsements written on the back cover by other influential Christian US pastors. Out of the five different endorsements written, 3 of the pastors have since had to step down from ministry. These men have sadly become examples of the very thing the book warns against. One stepped down because he committed adultery with a woman seeking his counsel for a difficult marriage. Another because of alleged bullying and authoritarian behaviour.

The insidious lust for power, pleasure and recognition is in all of us. We need to recognise that, pray for God's grace to live His way, and keep watching our lives in ministry.

“We loved you deeply.”

Third, Paul tells the Thessalonians, “You know we loved you deeply.”

You see, it's likely that Paul's opponents in Thessalonica were sowing seeds of doubt about Paul's love for the believers there.

When persecution broke out at the end of his ministry there, Paul was forced to leave abruptly. Acts 17:10 tells us that the brothers made the snap decision to send Paul and Silas away to the neighbouring city of Berea during the night. But you can imagine how Paul's opponents could have capitalised on the shock of Paul's sudden departure.

“What sort of person just abandons you at night without saying goodbye?”

“We're telling you this guy was just in it for the popularity and praise – as soon as that disappeared, so did he?”

“This guy doesn't love you, he just wanted to use you.”

Think of someone you deeply love in your life – someone you go to when things get rough. Someone you'd defend at all costs. Maybe a parent, a spouse, a friend, a child. Now think for a moment, that someone came and tried to convince that person that you couldn't care less about them. You'd be infuriated, gutted, determined to prove the sincerity of your love. That's Paul in verses 7 and following. He is determined to show that his ministry to them

was marked by a genuine and deep relationship of love. Look at the image he gives in verse 7:

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children,⁸ so we cared for you.

It's hard to think of a stronger image of fierce human love than a mother with her baby or children. But that's where Paul goes. "You weren't just another audience to us – you were like family – like our very children."

"And you guys know this because we loved to share our lives and love with you".

Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

Paul's words here, remind us that our ministry and evangelism to others is not just words or programs or rosters... but life. People need to be invited into our lives and experience real and tangible love so that they know we actually care about them. This is why last year was so hard – so much of life is done in the home – and yet we were barred for so long from entering the homes of others.

Sometimes when people speak with me about their desire to enter into full time gospel ministry – whether as a pastor or student worker - I'll usually outline three aspects that they need to think about in their life – It was presented to me as the three "C's" : Character, competency, conviction. Do you have the Christian character the bible requires? Have you demonstrated a level of competency to teach the bible? Do you have a conviction to give your life to this sometimes very challenging task? The three "Cs" are good things to think

about that primarily come out of Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy and Titus – but Paul reminds in this text that ministry the God approves demands another “C” from us – care. Care about people. Not willingness not just to teach them, but to open your life to them and to love them in real and tangible ways. Having them over for meals, going on walks with them. Helping them move house. Real and open love.

And Paul does this doesn't he? Look at what he says in v.9:

*⁹ Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, 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. ¹⁰ You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.*

We aren't told what Paul and his team did for a part time job – we know that he had skills as a tent-maker? But the point is that Paul and the team loved these people at their own expense – preaching during the day – working late into the evening to cover their food and accommodation costs.

It's kind of like a devoted Father who works two jobs so that he can keep his kids going to a particular school. And actually, Paul finishes on the note of fatherly love doesn't he? Verse 11:

¹¹ For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, ¹² encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

Paul may have been like a working Father, but he wasn't a distant one. He knew his spiritual children, and put time into discipling them with care and affection. He loved them deeply.

As someone who used to work in an eye clinic, I have always loved hearing the story of Bruce Olson, a missionary to the indigenous people of Colombia and Venezuela. During an epidemic of conjunctivitis Olson had great difficulty convincing the local tribe's people that his western antibiotics would be of benefit to them. So in an act of love, he went up to an infected person, scooped out some gunk and stuck it in his own eye. He waited for the infection to set in, and then showed them the power of antibiotics. They saw the effects and did likewise. Because He loved those he ministered to, he suffered for them.

Paul and Bruce Olsen remind us that great ministry demonstrates great love. We love, because we have first been loved. Christ suffered the extreme humiliation of a roman cross upon which he died. He did this because He loved us and wanted us to be forgiven by God and enjoy life. We, like Paul and Olson follow in Jesus' footsteps.

- Love leads us to buy some extra groceries for GG dinner.
- Love leads us to push through the awkwardness and speak of Christ to our neighbours.
- Love leads us to give up part of our weekend to visit a brother or sister who is sick or grieving.
- Love leads us to invite other brothers and sisters who we may not be close with into our home.

You know we loved you deeply says Paul.

What does a good ministry look like? Paul's example shows us. We keep the truth of the gospel central. We keep watch over our lives. We pursue Christ-like love.

And in a lockdown moment like this, it's good to remember where Paul's strength to be this kind of minister came from. Verse 2 – “But **with the help of our God**, we dared to tell you the gospel in the face of strong opposition.”

There are some moments like persecution or a pandemic that throws us into new lockdowns, that make teaching the people the gospel and loving them difficult. I suspect the very thought that we would again have to lead our GG via zoom again or care for a person remotely makes some of you shudder.

When I heard that we were in another lockdown, I was just really disappointed. A few of you were even all geared up to serve on tea and coffee tonight! I was looking forward to that cuppa! (And Lord willing we still will).

How do we keep speaking truth, acting with integrity and showing love when things seem unpredictable and overwhelming? With the Help of our God. That's how.

So let's keep trusting **God** to sustain us in the ministries he has called us to. And let's pray that through our commitment to gospel truth, godly integrity and Christ-like love, this moment of unpredictability, this year, will not be without results but full of gospel fruit among us.