

Ordination Sermon

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Preacher: Bishop Steve Breedlove

[0 : 00] Please pray with me. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this day again. We're grateful to be able to worship you. Lord, you know our hearts. You know the hearts of every person in this room.

And we ask you, Lord, to look with compassion upon our hearts, but also in your wisdom and in your kindness to speak from your word the words that we need to hear. Through Jesus Christ we pray.

Amen. If you have a Bible or if you have an app on your phone, please turn to the New Testament reading from 1 Thessalonians chapter 2. But if you do use your phone, please make sure it's quiet.

Appreciate that. You got plenty of music to listen to in the way back in the background. We even, you know, you don't need your phone, right? Got that. 1 Thessalonians 2 has long been a go-to passage for me in talking with and counseling and encouraging clergy. For four years, I was a full-time itinerant missionary traveling between three continents, and at that time also a deeply appreciated small investor in United Airlines. And I taught this passage often. But interestingly, it sort of disappeared from my thinking when I became an Anglican church planter. And I've only just recently rediscovered it in my work as a bishop. But as I dig back into this text, I really have a hard time finding a better passage to building a more effective vision for pastoral ministry.

Just as thorough going. And in that process, what I want all of you to hear is not only what I'm going to say to Jeff, but I'm going to want you to hear this through the ears of realizing that your true shepherd is Jesus. And whatever we are exhorting Jeff to do from this text, Jesus has already done.

[1 : 47] And he is doing in your life and in my life at all times. So I actually really want you to hear it that way. I want you to hear that this model of pastoring is simply a reflection of Jesus, and you have a relationship with Jesus as your good shepherd. So please hear it and take it very personally as the receiver of what we are going to read. I want to begin by noting something from chapter 1. Paul writes to this church with great joy because he encountered something when he first went to Thessalonica as a missionary church planter. And subsequently, he had heard reports that confirmed and even expanded what he personally seen when he was there. What he had seen is a great spiritual awakening. Look at verse 3.

Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. I'm remembering your faith, hope, and love. For we know, brothers and sisters, loved by God, that he has chosen you because our gospel came to you not only in word, but in power and in the Holy Spirit. And with full conviction, you know what kind of men we prove to be among you for your sake. This church represented a significant spiritual awakening among a group of people who had largely been pagan idolaters. There were a few Jews there who had a biblical worldview when they began to hear the gospel. But most of the people, as we're going to read a little bit in a couple more verses, were converts from Greek and Roman mythology and paganism. And of course, more than anything, the emperor cult that was rampant throughout Rome. And so they were not deeply rooted in a biblical worldview. Quite opposite had happened. And so their conversion was a remarkable transformation.

Look at verse 6. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, and you received the word in much affliction and with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we don't need to tell anybody to you. Paul is running around the Mediterranean world, and he's hearing about the church in Thessalonica and what an incredible transformation had happened there. They themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead. There is this enormous conversion experience and transformation and revival and awakening that happens in Thessalonica.

And so the question comes with such an effect, what is the adequate cause? You know, there's always got to be an adequate cause for such an effect. So what is the cause of such an effect? Well, I've already read it back in verses 4 and 5. If you look at it, it says, God's love was poured out upon them, the gospel of Jesus was preached to them, and the Holy Spirit came in power. So it's a Trinitarian outpouring, right? The love of God, the gospel of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit. But all of that was mediated and embodied by missionary pastors of whom Paul says, you know what kind of men we proved among you. Now, you usually don't say that unless you can stand behind it. In other words, you can look and see what kind of people you were. And you know them. It was already there. God's father love, and God the Son's message of redemption, and the power of the Holy Spirit came through these men who were exemplary pastors and preachers. And by the way, that's God's normal methodology of transformation. As He takes the Word of God, the love of God, the gospel itself, the power of the Holy

Spirit mediates it through people into our lives. And that's both the conversion experience and the long-term transformation process. And it's amazing to think that He's wrapped up His power of transformation in the lives of people who communicate. So again, just click on that. Think on that. Who are the people that have and do communicate God's love and power to you? And thank God for them.

[6 : 05] Praise God for them. Acknowledge it. Receive it. Let it soak into you as a gift from God. Through what kind of people? Paul says, you know what kind of men we were. And chapter 2 expands that phrase, you know what kind of men we were. And he focuses on two broad categories that these good young people have read to us today. Thanks, guys, by the way. Really appreciate it. You guys did a great job reading. Right? Amen. Amen. Amen. Two broad categories of what kind of men we proved among you, character and love. So let's talk about character. That's in the first five or six verses.

Their character means their allegiance to God and their integrity before God. And their allegiance and devotion is in verses 1 through 4. You know what, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you is not a vain. Though we've been suffered, already suffered and been shamefully treated in Philippi, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. They came in the midst of opposition and from opposition. And they, our appeal, therefore, does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, because frankly, it would have been beaten out of them. Okay? The purification process of persecution had made them even more determined to suffer for the cause of Christ. Eventually, in Paul's case, to die a martyr's death. They were wholly devoted to God. They themselves had experienced a radical transformation through Jesus. And I want to just stop here and remind you of something, one of my favorite passages in Scripture back in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, Paul talks about his own conversion. He says in chapter 5 that he used to regard Christ according to the flesh. That's a little phrase. I used to see Christ through the eyes of my flesh. And do you know what that's a reference to? Before he was a Christian, he was a Jew. He would look at the cross.

He would see Jesus, this man, died on the cross, and his conclusion would have been what? This man was cursed of God. Therefore, he was to be rejected and opposed with all of his heart.

Because that's the Old Testament. But then, what happened is we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he's a new creation. The old has passed away. The new thing has come. And he goes on to tell that what he realized by the power of God through the encounter he had with the risen Jesus is that, yes, Jesus was cursed on the cross for our sake. And he goes on in this very passage to say, he who knew no sin became sin that we might become the righteousness of God. And so, what was happening on the cross was the bearing of the curse in our place.

And the resurrection just completely flipped his eyes of Jesus. He had this incredible encounter with Christ in this transformation that he saw Christ in a completely different way. And now, he says this in chapter 5 of 2 Corinthians, for the love of Christ controls us. Having concluded this, that one has died for all, therefore have all died. And if he died for all, that those who might live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who, for their sake, died and was raised.

[9 : 27] And so, where he scrolls forward, and what I'm trying to get us to in this passage in 1 Thessalonians is that Paul was transformed and inspired and literally captivated by the love of Jesus.

And therefore, he was willing to suffer for the love of Jesus. And he was willing to suffer to proclaim the love of Jesus. Because behind the cross, he saw this immeasurable love, and that love drove him. And that love for Christ, and that love for his message, and his mission, and for the people that he died for, was purified and honed by the fires of suffering. These pastors and missionaries were deeply transformed in their character, because their allegiance and their love for Christ was purified through their allegiance to the greatest martyr and witness of all time, who was Jesus, right? And all this fed into their integrity before God and mankind. Verse 5, you know, you know, for we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor were the pretext for greed God as witness, nor did we seek glory from people, whether it was from you or from others, that we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. Paul says, I was not there for my personal needs. I was not using you to meet my needs. I was not using you to meet my financial needs.

I didn't take greedy money from you. In fact, I worked to provide for myself so that I could give you the gospel for free. And he was not there for psychological greed. I'm not there for you to make me feel good about me. I'm here to love you for the sake of Christ. And that gave him the freedom to speak the truth to people in every direction, because he was not there to be loved by them, but to love them. And he was not there for them to make him wealthy in any way, materially or psychologically. And he was beholden to no one except God. And so this devotion to God, this allegiance, this love for God, and the integrity of living unto him and for his pleasure alone made them the kind of men that they were. Character, character, character. I want to pause just for a minute and reflect on integrity, because I use that word in this character development. Jeff, you can take the concept of integrity and rightly assume that every, all sorts of specific dimensions that pertain to integrity are involved in that word, okay? Involved in that sort of picture of integrity, of things like truthfulness, no lying, no deceit, not exaggerating or stretching stories to make yourself look better, not taking credit for what others have done or what God alone has done, but giving credit where credit is due. Humility, an honest self-assessment of always standing before the judgment of God so that his evaluation is what we listen to. The whole realm, obviously, of sexuality is involved in this, this purity and staying within God's bounds for sex and where it's to be used. The integrity of pursuing healthy relationships and loving friendships, giving an honest day's work.

Later on in this text that we've already read, and we'll mention it again in a moment, Paul describes his conduct as holy and righteous and blameless. Those are bold words to describe yourself. But as a man who is determined to stand consistently before the judgment of God, I don't think Paul would have said that unless he could back it up. Rodney Stark talks about the rise of Christianity, the conversion of the Roman Empire, and how it was transformed in about three centuries through the presence of the church and the growth of the church. And the conversion of the Roman Empire was carried on the wave, the current of a radical new ethic, Rodney Stark observes, a radical new morality, a new integrity. And so I want to just, again, think about this with you as a congregation, because our gospel must be a gospel of not only the proclamation of Christ, but the living out of a different lifestyle. Sexual purity, Rodney Stark says, was crucial to the church's early growth. An incredibly confrontive way of living sexually that opposed the rampant and almost unimaginable sexual promiscuity of the Roman Empire. So you could even talk about the gospel of sexual purity. And that led, of course, to the guarding and the honoring of marriage and the family. A second part of their ethic was that women and children, the vulnerable and the weak and the powerless, were honored and given a place and a voice within the church. A third aspect is how slaves were treated. Again, read your stories of the history of the Roman Empire. Slaves, over 50% of the people of the Roman Empire were slaves. And they were treated unspeakably horribly, used as any way they possibly would. But now suddenly in the church, slaves and slave owners are standing in worship next to each other. A fourth aspect of their integrity was that they did what they said. They gave an honest day's work for their wages. And then finally, they were willing to attend to the needy in times of plague and war and disaster in ways that risked their own lives. So Stark does a thorough theological, excuse me, sociological research into what transformed or what was going on in the Roman Empire, and it's those five aspects. And every one of those aspects reveals a new integrity that confronted the world around them. And brothers and sisters, I believe we're in that same sort of time.

It's our lifestyle, our gospel proclamation, but the integrity and the morality that we live out that will be essential to the power of the gospel in our communities. And as you reflect on those issues, Jeff, I want to mention something that I read from a spiritual writer named Tilden Edwards. It sticks in my mind. I keep it in his mind. He writes this, every obedience, he's writing concerning obedience, every obedience, however small, as if there are any small obediences, take us in the direction of deep personal transformation. And so I just think in this whole realm of character development, our obedience to the still small voice of God and the Spirit's prompting is essential.

[15 : 51] And every obedience is a big obedience, no matter how small it may seem, because it will shape us in a direction. It moves us in a direction. There are many people who have noted and warned leaders about the snares of the big three, money, sex, and power. But I want to add also deception and pride.

And in light of those categories of character behavior, I'm going to remind you of a familiar text, Proverbs 4.23, guard your heart with all vigilance, for out of it flow the springs of life.

Guard your heart. Guard your heart, brother. Now, there is another category of the kind of men that we prove to be among you, and that is love. Two aspects, character and love. That's the kind of men they proved among you. And Paul describes his love in two descriptions, mother love and father love.

And he shared in both of those the sacrifice for the sake of the children. Now, I want you to keep in mind as I say this, and this is not any kind of prophetic prediction, okay? So please don't hear it that way, okay? But Paul was not married when he was talking about loving them like a father and a mother.

He was not a father in any physical sense. But in other words, this invites all of us to understand the fact that we as Christians, but particularly the leaders, married, single, whatever, are called to a kind of love that Paul describes as father love and mother love. And again, I'm going to remind all of us that that's the kind of love that we have from Jesus himself. So let it kind of alert you to what Christ has done. And I don't want to get distracted from the substance of love that Paul wants to describe in some big discussion about gender differences and parenting skills, okay?

[17 : 45] This is not about the particular things that any particular individual do. And the dimensions of parental love exist on a bell curve, and we all fall somewhere on that. But the fact is that God describes his love for us throughout the Bible as father-like and mother-like. And both of those reflect the love of God. And I want to think of them in some ways as iconic, an icon, a way in which we view the love of God through an icon, sort of an image of something. Well, mother love is iconic for gentleness and affection and nurturing and the self-giving dimensions of love. Paul says that.

Verse 7, 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'd become very dear to us. And we were willing to bring our strength under control. That's mother love, by the way. Strength under control. By the way, if you don't think that's true, I'm going to give you a little bit of an illustration. Years and years ago, when we first moved to the Triangle, we went up to the Breed Love Reading Room in the Duke University Library. There is a Breed Love Reading Room. It was really sweet of them to put that aside for me. But anyway, but we went up at the Breed Love Reading Room, this big library, this beautiful library, Gothic library. And on the wall were 27 banners of people from the Duke community. And they had their picture on it in this long banner with different things that they had asked each person. And so it was administrators and groundskeepers and professors and students and, you know, all sorts of male, female, all the races and everything. And they had a number of questions, who they were and all this kind of stuff. The last question was, who's the most important person, most influential person in your life? 22 out of the 27 had the same answer. Guess who it was? My mother. So I want us to understand that there is this power in this icon of mother love. And it's the way in which impacts people when we give ourselves, when we nurture ourselves, when we serve up nourishment invitingly. We do not throw food at, quote, a spoke, like Elmo's Diner. You know what I mean? You actually make it palatable what you say.

And you make it pleasant what you say. And you communicate in ways that can be received. Affection, sharing our own lives. Paul, a single male, says, I shared my life with you like mothers have affection for their children. Making themselves vulnerable. The risk of hurting for others.

The risk of bearing the pain. This hinge verse, verse 9, I think replies to mother love, but also to father love that's going to come.

For you remember, brothers and sisters, 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. Whether you're talking about mother love or father love, it is a sacrificial love. In every way. And he goes on to talk about the sacrifice and toil on the father side. What is iconic of father love? As Paul describes it, he talks about it as exhortation, encouragement, and witnessing. Exhortation and encouragement are both Greek words built on the prefix para, which means alongside. Walking alongside. You know, maybe you've heard the phrase, the Greek word for the Holy Spirit, the paraclete, the one who walks alongside and talks and calls out from us. Well, Paul says, I paraclete'd you. I was a paraclete to you.

[21 : 39] I walked alongside to call and encourage and invite. I also was a parametheo, a different word. I was counseling you. I was consoling you. I was comforting you. I found it interesting over the course of my pastoral ministry and also my fathering life that taking a walk with a person that I'm seeking to talk to and care for, especially my sons or maybe other men, opens up the heart of communication in ways that sitting in a table doesn't. It's strange, but they have actually found scientifically now medically that the, and I don't even know what it is. Sally can tell you about it because I don't remember, but it's the walking, the cycle, the rhythm of walking, which actually moves both parts of your body. And they found out that it literally opens up your brain and your heart and it opens things up. And Paul says that I did that in the spiritual realm. I walked alongside you.

And whether he physically walked alongside people or not, we don't know, but he certainly did it in terms of encouraging, counseling, consoling, inviting. Hi, welcome. Good to see you.

Scrolling forward, having this encouragement and exhortation, Paul adds the last phrase in verse 12, we exhorted you, encouraged you, and charged you. And the word in the original is really, I think, easier to understand. It's the word martyr. We martyred you. We were a martyria. We were a witness to you. Witnessing and speaking out of the conviction and experience of our own lives. Paul says, I personally shared the stories in ways that offered you guidance. And I want you to notice this last phrase for all of us, but Jeff, particularly for you and your ministry, I charge you to walk in a manner worthy of God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. And I believe that you and your ministry and the proper ministry of an encourager is to give people, bear witness, draw a picture of the purposes of God for the lives of his children and paint a picture of them, of the glory of God being displayed through their lives. I think it is a dimension of naming somebody in the spiritual realm, helping them to see who they are called to be and can be by the power of God. Taking verses like

Ephesians 2.10, which says, we're God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, and helping people discern what their good works are meant to be. And again, that's what father love, according to Paul, iconically does, is help people, in a sense, live up to the image of Christ. Draw the picture and say, step into that and live into that and live up to what God has called you to be and given you that opportunity. Jeff, this is a lot of information, but let me gather it back together. I've been talking most recently about parental love, and I think that there is a lot for parents to learn from this, by the way. But the topic is not a home, a family life. The topic is Paul's ministry as a pastor, as a single man, a childless man, to his church. And he's basically saying in a pastor, as a pastor, he's called to deeply love, like mother's love and father's love. And it's a huge picture. And I do want to give you one more encouraging word. Look at the pronouns. None of them are singular. All of them are we.

So in your pastoral ministry, build a team. Help other people to learn to share the love with you. Character and love. This has been a rough, rough season for the church of Jesus Christ.

[25 : 35] Not only are people in our culture increasingly comfortable with openly rejecting and scorning Christian beliefs, the Christian faith is seen as an enemy of human freedom and therefore of human flourishing. There's this deep-seated conviction that freedom to fulfill oneself in whatever ways we define is key to human flourishing. That's what our culture believes. So a faith that builds any kind of guardrails for human identity or human behavior that calls us to stand even willingly or eagerly before God and his opinions of us, his truth about us, to the world, it seems like insanity. It just seems like a way to commit suicide spiritually or mentally or psychologically. And so the church and its message are increasingly discordant of the world. But this is not new issues. Every church has shared many of those same criticisms in every age, and it suffered greatly. And it was the endurance and the witness unto martyrdom that was a normal part of the first 300 years that was also part of that transformation. And more and more I believe that we are going to have to stand firm even at the cost or the willingness to face rejection or even death. But what seems different now to me, brothers and sisters, and to you, Jeff, as well, is that we've handed our opponents the knives that they wield against us. We've sharpened them and given them a knife. What weapons have we sharpened? What have we put in the hands of the skeptics or the rejecters? Well, the number one reason, it seems, if you look at the record out there, is the shame and sin of leaders who have been the opposite of what St. Paul describes.

They have not been men of character, women of character. They have not been men and women of integrity. They have not been men and women of true love. We have around us examples of people who have stretched the truth, deceived, lied for personal gain, had hidden lives, secret cell phones by which they could conduct their sinful behavior. They've gained financially, greedily, mismanaged money.

They've been dishonest in their work. They've failed the test of integrity. They've not loved sacrificially like a mother or loved sacrificially like a father. And I don't think we can complain that the church has fallen on hard times when in fact we have failed in our basic commitments.

To be the people that we are to be. Our commitments to the sheep, our commitments to the community, and our commitments to God. So I appeal to you and I urge you, young man, be determined to willingly suffer for the sake of the gospel. To face death rather than compromise, and your public witness, if it were to come to that. Live in that way, even though I doubt you'll ever face that issue.

Live a life of thoroughgoing and growing integrity. Stand before the judgment of God. Remember that there are no small obediences. Love like a mother. Love like a father. And by all means, serve and do not seek to be served. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.