

Spiritual Ministry

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Preacher: Pastor Andrew

[0 : 00] Thank you, worship team.

That is a fitting song. Heart of my own heart, whatever befall, Lord, be my vision, O ruler of all. ! It really is the key. That's the answer for how we can do what we're going to talk about this morning.

That we see that Jesus is not only the ruler of life, not only the one who calls the shots in our life, not only the one who has supreme authority in life, but he's the one who governs all of life. Meaning, whatever happens to me, whether I think they're right or wrong, whether they lead to a sense of hurt or injustice, that I see that Jesus, as the absolute ruler of all, has all these things in order.

[1 : 22] And he's working all of these things, not only for my good and for his glory, but for my best. That's the key.

It won't happen any other way. So before we even begin to talk about spiritual ministry, we have to really understand and orient our heart towards the real motivation for spiritual ministry and what helps to anchor our soul, anchor our activity in the midst of spiritual activity.

Because as we're going to see this morning, true spiritual ministry doesn't always lead us to happy places. As a matter of fact, true spiritual ministry will lead you to some of the most difficult, one of the most agonizing places of suffering and adversity and opposition and antagonism and criticism and fill in the blank with any other word you want to use.

It is not a happy human experience. So how do you go the distance if it is not for the stabilizing confidence in a God who is able to superintend and rule over all of these things?

That's what grounds us in spiritual ministry that we've been called to. Wherever that spiritual ministry might be. That is the starting place.

[3 : 06] And it's just not going to be worth it if Christ is not your supreme affection. It is not going to be worth it. So as I open us up this morning in prayer, let's plead with God for he to be the supreme affection for our ministry.

Oh God, we come to you this morning as broken and desperate people.

Weak and frail and fractured in so many ways. God, we need you to put those pieces together and forgive us even this week for the ways that we have not only displeased you, but we have been rebels.

We have absolutely opposed the true word that we know in our hearts. We know what you've called us to, and yet we have decided to find pleasure in other things and to gratify ourselves in other ways.

To have it now instead of having it later and having it in the best way that you choose for us. So as a starting point, Lord, this morning, we just come and we pray for your forgiveness.

[4 : 45] We pray for your mercy. We pray for your cleansing and for your help on our time today. We cannot be people who are involved in spiritual ministry without the God who creates spiritual ministry in us.

Who leads us to spiritual ministry. Who makes us fit for spiritual ministry. And then, by your grace, gives us the opportunity to be involved in spiritual ministry wherever we might be.

So, Lord, as we come to this passage, I pray that you would connect it to our hearts and our situations in the specific ways that each person who is here this morning needs it applied.

What a diverse group that we have here. Older and younger. Those who are in school and those who are not. Those who are working and those who are retired. And those with families and those who don't.

And you know each situation this morning. And you know how to connect this word to each individual. And so I pray, Lord, that you would do that work. Forgive us for the arrogance that would say that we have arrived.

[6 : 05] Help us to submit ourselves, Lord, to the teaching of your word this morning. So we can walk out of this place being refreshed, being renewed, being encouraged, being exhorted and challenged.

Inspired to represent you well in this world. As representatives, as ambassadors of the only one that matters. Ambassadors for Christ.

Lord, there are so many people this morning in this service who are wrestling with real and tangible hurts. We need you to overcome our hurts.

Our pains. Those are real pains. Real hurts. We need the comfort of God to comfort us. So that we can have the ministry of comfort. So that we can comfort others with the same comfort with which we ourselves have been comforted by God.

That too is a ministry. That you use our pain to encourage others around us. And Lord, you use your word. The word that you have spoken to us directly and you have connected to our hearts.

[7 : 21] You have used that as an opportunity for us to then encourage and exhort others as well. Help us to be faithful to the word we know.

Help us to be ready vessels. Ready for the ministry that you have placed right in front of us. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. I had a friend text me this week and ask me this question. He said, what is a disciple?

What is a disciple? That's kind of an important question, wouldn't you say? Because if we're called to discipleship and we're called to be disciples, then we kind of need to know the destination.

We kind of need to know where we're going. We need to know how we, whether or not we're on the right road. We need to know what sort of characteristics would be true of that individual so that we can help that person be a disciple.

[8 : 32] My response to him was, well, a disciple is a Christ follower. It makes sense.

We look in the gospel of Luke in particular and we see that Jesus is constantly saying to the people that he's in connection with, follow me. It begins with being a Christ follower and the consistent testimony of a life that is following Christ is certainly indicative of a disciple.

His question back to me then was, okay, what is a Christ follower? Because that is so broad and so general. And I sarcastically said, well, it's a disciple.

Shoot. I guess it wasn't a very good answer. I said, well, obviously you know what a disciple and a Christ follower is, so help me overcome some of the Sunday school answers that we tend to have. But I don't think it's complex. I don't think it needs to be sophisticated. Because the message of Christ is a message of simplicity. It's a message that he advocates that even a young child should be able to understand this, these truths, and yet deep enough to inform the heart of the strongest believer.

[10 : 00] And it really boils down to, yes, this person is a Christ follower. And the more you follow after Christ, the more you realize how difficult it is to do.

To really not only embrace Christ, but to reflect the heart, the actions, the attitude, the motives, the priorities, and the faith of Christ to the world.

That's what we've been called to. To be a Christ follower. But how does that look? What form does that take?

And I think Paul helps to fill that out for us in our study this morning. But maybe to kind of summarize it in an encapsulating statement, we find in Colossians chapter 3, verse 23, this verse. Whatever you do, work heartily, as if to the Lord, and not for men. Knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward.

[11 : 14] You are serving the Lord Christ. That really is the anthem of the message this morning.

Your spiritual ministry is first ministry to God. Be thou my vision, ruler of all.

Anchor my soul in the understanding, in the truth, that everything I do and everything I am is first oriented to you.

That's the only way true spiritual ministry can happen. But we get some details. This morning in our passage in 1 Thessalonians chapter 2.

I see this breaking down in three different ways. First, Paul gives us a testimony of spiritual ministry. He gives us his personal testimony of what this looks like.

[12:22] How can you begin to see and differentiate between true spiritual ministry and that which is false? Because there are certain indicators that help us recognize what true spiritual ministry is all about.

What does a ministry that is oriented first to God look like? So Paul gives us several verses that begin to talk about what his testimony of spiritual ministry is.

And by the way, although Paul is speaking from his own experience, he's talking about what spiritual ministry looks like. I want us all to recognize this morning that you are a spiritual minister. Regardless of your title, regardless of your occupation, regardless of your social standing, you are a spiritual minister today.

And that there is a ministry that only you can accomplish. There is a ministry that God has ordained for you to do.

[13:33] We find that in Ephesians chapter 2.10. You are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works. There is a work, a ministry that only you can do this morning.

So wherever you find yourself, God has called you to spiritual ministry in that context.

Maybe even as a young person in a family, God has called you to ministry in your family, to your siblings, to your parents, to your friends in your community, to your friends at school, wherever you might be.

God has called you, if you are a child of his, to a spiritual ministry. But as Paul begins to describe this ministry, we begin to see how distinctive this ministry is.

How different that ministry is than what we would expect spiritual ministry to look like. Let me just read the first couple of verses, because Paul begins by calling attention to the commitment that is required in true spiritual ministry.

[14:45] That's our first point this morning. The commitment of true spiritual ministry, serving at all costs. Let me read verses 1 and 2 of chapter 2.

I don't know about you, but this is not a great way to call people to ministry.

This isn't a good way to say, hey, this is really attractive. You should try it too. If you're going to be involved in spiritual ministry, it's going to require a bit of commitment.

Commitment at all costs. Now, Paul here refers to his suffering in Philippi, because that's what would have been fresh. That's what would have been familiar to the church of Thessalonica, given the fact that Paul had just left Philippi to then make his way there to Thessalonica to serve there. But make no mistake, in his first and second and third missionary journey, every place, I can't think of any, and maybe you can help me, every place that Paul went, he was met with opposition.

[16:14] Every single place. In his first missionary journey, he goes to Cyprus first. And he's opposed by Elimus, the magician. And God works there through the heart of the Pearl Council.

Does some work, but he's opposed. Then he sets sail to Paphos and come to the city of Perga, and he's abandoned by John Mark. John Mark leaves the team.

So then they go to Antioch and Pisidia. And the Jews oppose him there and contradict them and incite high-standing officials and the people and stir up persecution among the town and drive them out.

So Paul goes to Iconium. Iconium and Lystra, the region where Timothy grew up. The unbelieving Jews there were stirred up, and the Gentiles as well, and they tried to stone Paul and Barnabas and his team.

So then they come to Lystra. And that's where Paul was actually stoned. They didn't just attempt it. They dragged him out of the city and threw stones at him until they thought he was dead. They returned back to Antioch and Jerusalem, and then they go on their second missionary journey, and it doesn't go very well then either.

[17:33] Paul tries to go to Asia, but he's forbidden by the Holy Spirit. He attempts to go to Bithynia, but the door is closed. Then he comes and he's told to go to Macedonia, and the first town of Macedonia is the town of Philippi.

And we all know what happens in Philippi. Things begin to go well, but once Paul casts out a demon from a slave girl, he's hauled before the marketplace, he's attacked by the crowd, he's beaten with rods, and he's put in prison.

They move to Thessalonica, and things don't go much better there. You see, the same in Berea, and the same in every other location that Paul sets his mind to serve.

The point is this. Serving at all costs is what spiritual ministry looks like.

And Paul would say, suffering is not a mark of failure. Hear it. Suffering is not a mark of failure. [18 : 43] And suffering is not a mark of God's displeasure. And suffering is not a mark of the adversary getting the upper hand.

Rather, suffering is a means of God's power. In a way for God to authenticate his messenger and his message.

It is the way to crystallize in the minds of the people who are being served. Ah, this is one who means what he says. This is one who has the fortitude by God to press on in the midst of adversity. And as Peter would say in chapter 4 of his little letter, don't be surprised by the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening, but rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings that you may also be glad when his glory is revealed.

If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed because the spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

[20 : 08] That's what suffering does. Do you want the spirit of God to rest on your life and ministry? Do you want the power of God to make your ministry, your spiritual ministry to others in your home, in your school, in your workplace, in your community?

Do you want to make it efficient and effective? Then don't run from persecution. Press in. Press in and allow the spirit of glory and of God to rest on you.

That is the promise. That's pretty remarkable, wouldn't you say? The problem is that we so often push against persecution.

We push against adversity. We push against injustice in our lives. We push against those things and by pushing against those things, we push against God.

That's the danger. Suffering marked Paul's ministry time and time again.

[21 : 20] And through suffering, God showed himself faithful. And God made his gospel effective and fruitful. Suffering is a means of seeing God do his work for you and in you and through you.

Second, Paul points to the motive of ministry. Not only his commitment to ministry, serving at all costs, but his motive for ministry, which is serving to please God. Let me read for us verses 3 to 6. It says this, For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak.

Not to please men, but God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed. God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could be made, have made demands as apostles of Christ, but we were gentle among you.

And we'll get to that piece in a second. Paul begins to describe the purity of the ministry that he had among the Thessalonian church.

[22 : 46] He commends it in particular because at this point in time, even at the very beginning stages of the development of this church, Paul was facing significant criticism.

False teachers assailed him, as they often do other faithful shepherds, by impugning his character and challenging his authority. Thus, the opening statements we find in chapter 2 is this polemic that Paul gives in defense of his ministry to the church of Thessalonica.

In spite of the purity of Paul's life and the transforming power of his message, the enemies of the gospel were having some success in convincing the Thessalonians that Paul and his companions were wicked in their intentions.

So Paul needs to go about demonstrating the purity of his message in the gospel ministry to this church. He pushes against the accusations that are being levied against him as a missionary.

He says in verse 3, there is no error. There was no impurity. There was no deception. There was no flattery, no greed or desire for personal glory.

[24 : 03] There were no demands that we made of you as we could have as apostles. Just the pure, untainted, radiant message of the word.

There were no ulterior motives. Paul walks through this piece by piece. He says, you may essentially feel that we had ulterior motives but we have been approved by God.

Notice the number of times that he points their attention to the fact that God is at the front and center of their ministry and he is at the end point of their ministry.

He's the one who got this all going. He's the one who initiated this to begin with. We have been approved by him and entrusted by him to do the work. We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the fact that God had told us to come.

We wouldn't be here unless God had given us the strength to overcome the adversity that we had experienced in every single place that we have been. He's the one who gave us boldness.

[25 : 11] He's the one who fanned the flames of our hearts to serve in this way. He's the one who gave us endurance to overcome. He's the one whose message we bring to you.

He's the one who sustains us in this work. We have been approved by God. And you may feel that we had ulterior motives but our primary aim is to please God and not to please men.

I've recognized in my own life how difficult that is and how subtle how subtle the indications are that my heart and my desire for ministry is really man-centered rather than God-centered.

Oh, it is subtle. To be involved in ministry and to walk away feeling as though you didn't perform the way you wanted to.

There is a sense that you didn't meet your own expectations. Well, why would you be concerned about that if you are trusting in a God who is able to make your ministry successful and fruitful regardless of how terrible you communicate that God's ministry in the heart will be effective in spite of you because of the power of his word.

[26 : 39] Who are you trusting in? your ability to convey the truth or God's ability to make that truth grow in a life.

The desire to be up front or the jealousy that we feel when others get certain positions that we want or the idea that there's no way we're going to serve in a certain ministry because it's just not up my alley.

It's not my passion. It's just it's children's ministry. I can tell you that God by his grace has given me more refreshment in areas of ministry I didn't feel like I was inclined to because it gave him the opportunity to show up.

it gave him the opportunity to demonstrate to me in my arrogant heart that it is he who creates the ministry work not me.

It's not built on my personal giftedness but it's based upon the power of God alone. We'll never get there if our orientation is to please men and not to please God.

[28 : 06] in his mind it is offensive. Paul points to this in Galatians 1.10 when he says for am I now seeking the approval of men or of God or am I trying to please men if I were still trying to please men I would not be a servant of Christ.

You can't have it both ways. maybe Paul was also saying this you may feel that we had ulterior motives but it is God who tests our hearts.

He says that there in verse 4b God is the one who approves us for ministry and God is the one who tests us throughout the ministry.

ministry we are accountable to him and by the way God knows the very depths of our hearts doesn't he? There is no masquerade with God he sees to the very heart of the matter and Paul says I am open and laid bare to the penetrating gaze of God and he is the one who is testing our ministry. He is the one who is approving us for ministry. And there is a sense of refreshment in Paul's heart that says whatever may happen in this place happens because God is in control.

[29 : 30] I am trusting in him. Finally you may feel that we have ulterior motives but God is witness we see that in verse 5. God testifies to the authenticity of our faith by doing his work in lives and you have personally witnessed it.

He has been talking about that since chapter 1. The fact that they have responded to the word and the Holy Spirit has done a work in their life. And it is refreshing for the apostle Paul to see that God is giving witness to the authenticity of the ministry that Paul had by confirming that in the work of the people that Paul was in touch with.

God is witness. Nothing is hidden from his sight. There is no secret motive, no hidden agenda, no interest in profiting from you or taking advantage of you.

God has approved us, tested us, and given witness to the purity of our ministry. I would say, the greater the purity of your ministry, the greater the effectiveness of the work that God can accomplish through you.

Now moving on to verses 7 and 8. That was the testimony of spiritual ministry. Now we get to see a little bit of the tenderness, the tenderness of spiritual ministry.

[31 : 09] ministry. The tenderness of spiritual ministry. Let me read verses 7 and 8 to you. It says, but 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.

Now, I don't know what your perception of the apostle Paul is. I think of this battle-weathered, crusty, bold guy who's moving from one place to the other, and he's got this, I don't know, this courage, this tenacity that drives him from one city to the next.

And when I think of tenacity, I think of courage, I think of strength, I don't think of tenderness. And yet, everywhere you see the apostle go, there is this great affection for the people that he serves. There's no wonder why his ministry was so effective, because he didn't just communicate the truth to them, he gave them his very self. There was nothing that was held back from you, of me, he says, because I wanted you to have it all.

[32 : 42] I wanted you to have all of me, not just my message, but me too. I wanted to invest in your life, I wanted to give you what you needed most, and that is the tenderness and encouraging ministry, just like a mother has with a child.

It's interesting, the play on words that Paul uses here in verse 7. He says, but we were gentle among you. And there are some manuscripts that would use the word hapeoi, which is the word gentleness, or the word napioi, which is the word infant.

And we don't know exactly which one is best here, but they both point to the same thing. They both point to tenderness and gentleness and innocence in ministry.

It's probably actually best to see this as an infant among you, because the best manuscripts use that word, and the connotation would be we were so innocent and so frail, we came without any desire to do anything to you, just to be a blessing to you.

And then to move from that metaphor of being an infant to now talking about being a mom. We're like mothers to you, showing the gentleness and care that only comes from a mom.

[34 : 13] Any of you who've had kids, and I'll speak for dads, because that's what I am. You know, the first couple of days is great, you know, so happy to have this little bundle of joy in your house.

And the couple of sleepless hours at night is no problem, I can handle it. But then after week two, it's like, enough already.

But you moms are just amazing because there seems to be this unending affection and gentleness for your kids. To the extent that the word that Paul uses here of nursing moms is is the word that helps us understand the closeness of a mom's care for her kids.

It's the word that is used to describe softness and heat to make warm. There is this sense of intimacy and closeness that can only happen through body heat.

It is the sense that Christ communicates when he says, follow me. I don't want there to be separation. I want there to be proximity. It's the same sense we get from John chapter 15 where he says, abide in me and I in you.

[35 : 40] I want there to be nearness. I want there to be intimacy. I look forward to the opportunity to know you intimately and to love you completely.

It was also marked by affection, not only by gentleness but also by affection. He says that here in verse 8, so affectionately longing for you, this word is only used in the New Testament right here in 1 Thessalonians chapter 2.

It is used of grieving parents whose child has just died. You can get a sense of the raw, emotional grieving and feeling of Paul for this church.

This emotional outflow of affection for this group of individuals, his yearning for them. Paul would say, this affection led us to give you what was essential for spiritual life.

We gave you everything we had. We gave you what was best. We gave you what we knew could lead to ultimate joy. Because that's what spiritual affection does.

[37 : 03] Spiritual affection understands and discerns between what is good and what is best.

What is helpful and what is supreme. Because we understand as parents that sometimes our kids ask for things that really aren't very helpful in the end.

But a truly affectionate parent will always give their kids, the people they love, the very best. And that's what Paul in his ministry to this church was desiring to do.

It was a ministry that pointed to Christ because it was a ministry that emulated the love of Christ to them. I like what one commentator says when he puts it this way.

A gospel messenger who stands detached from his audience has not yet been touched by the very gospel he proclaims.

a gospel messenger who stands detached from his audience has not yet been touched by the very gospel he proclaims.

[38 : 19] Maybe this goes without saying. But you cannot communicate a message effectively without having a heart that truly loves the audience that you're speaking to.

And so the deeper the relationships that you have, the deeper the ministry that you can participate in with that individual. That's why we've been talking about the significance of neighboring. Having sincere affection for the people that God has put in your proximity, not only in your community but in your workplace, wherever you might be on a regular basis because the ministry that you have with them will be dependent upon a true affection for them that only God can create in your heart.

Paul uses these endearing terms throughout these first three chapters. He says in chapter 1, verse 2, we give thanks to God for you. In chapter 2, verse 8, so affectionately desirous of you.

In chapter 2, verse 20, you are our glory and our joy. In chapter 3, verse 9, for what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God.

[39 : 41] And there is no other little epistle that has been written by Paul that uses the word brother more than first Thessalonians. He had a heart connection with these people.

There's no wonder why his ministry to them was so effective. And finally, we find in verses 9 to 12, we find a ministry of toil and truth.

A spiritual ministry of toil and truth. It shows up in three different ways. First, it shows up through personal sacrifice, then through personal holiness, and finally, through practical teaching.

practical teaching. I got way more than I can say. And so what I'll probably do is come back to this portion later on, because I think this is really significant. But what I want you to begin to understand is what makes this ministry so important, is that it is a ministry, not just that emulates the ministry of Paul, but more importantly, mimics the ministry of the Savior.

[41 : 00] The Savior who came in truth and in grace is the ministry that we've been called to emulate in our own lives. Maybe we can close on just the last chart that I put together here.

It helps you see the similarities. authorities. Maybe you can't see that. Shucks.

I want you to know that verses 1 through 6, or 1 through 8, are parallel to verses 9 to 12. Okay? The very things you see in the ministry of Paul, like moms to the church of Thessalonica, are emulated by the ministry that he has just like dad to the church.

So, he wants you to understand that they're inseparable. That if you have the one, that you're going to have the other. If you have a ministry of grace, you're going to also have a ministry of truth.

If you're going to look like moms in your affection for people that God has put you in ministry with, you're going to look like dads because that ministry is going to be bolstered and strengthened by the ministry of truth and toil.

[42 : 18] I mean, just for your benefit, just point some of these things out. Verse 1 says, you yourselves know. Verse 9 begins with, you yourselves know.

In verse 2, it says, we declare the gospel of God. In verse 9, we proclaim the gospel of God. In verse 3, it's our appeal, which uses the word periclesis.

In verse 12, it says, we exhorted, which uses the word pericleo. In verse 3, it says, God tests our hearts. And in verse 5, it says, God is our witness.

And then in verse 10, you, our witness, is in God also. In verse 3, we didn't come with impurity or attempt to deceive. In verse 5, we never came with flattery or with greed.

And then in verse 10, we were holy, righteous, and blameless towards you. Verse 5, you know how we acted. Verse 11, you know how we acted.

[43 : 23] Verse 7, we were like a mother. Verse 11 and 12, we were like a father. If you're going to have true spiritual ministry, you need to be like a mom.

You need to be full of grace. There needs to be godly affection for the people that God has put you in touch with. But that can't be lacking the spiritual ministry like dad, a ministry of toil and truth.

The two go hand in hand. Because true spiritual ministry is a ministry that emulates our Savior, a man of truth and grace.

Oh, that we would be like our Savior. Let's pray. Thank you.