

Apostolic Integrity in Ministry

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[0 : 00] Welcome to another Sermon on the Web from St. John's Shaughnessy Anglican Church in Vancouver, Canada.

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The following message is from the February 4, 2001 service at St. John's Shaughnessy. The Rev. John Oakes delivered his message from the book of 1 Thessalonians, the 2nd chapter, verses 1-16. The title of the message is Apostolic Integrity in Ministry. Well, it's a pleasure to be with you this morning and I must say that standing in this pulpit is just as impressive as I thought that it would be. It's been 11 years since we first attended St. John's over Christmas 1989 and we sat near the back to hear Harry Robinson's preaching.

[1 : 23] And if you told me then that I'd one day be doing what I am today, I'd probably have said that you were crazy. At that stage I was about to start my studies at Regent College and I was a committed Baptist.

Obviously not that committed. I wanted to preach but I didn't have a lot of experience. I had no intention of training for the Anglican ministry or of teaching at Regent where I'm now a sessional lecturer for my sins.

We didn't even think that we'd be staying in Canada for very long. But here I am and here you are. It's amazing what God can do and how God can surprise us.

Here I am six feet above contradiction, as the old saying goes. I don't know if it is six feet or not. And however unlikely our position of ministry, that's also, if you think about it, one of the challenges that we face.

When I was preparing for this sermon, the dangerous thought occurred to me that I could say just about anything I wanted to.

[2 : 44] I probably wouldn't get away with it for very long and I don't expect that David would ask me back. But if I chose this morning, I could speak in support of same-sex unions.

I could deny the physical resurrection of Jesus or his virgin birth. I could tell you that all religions lead to God.

That's the power and privilege that we give those whom we set apart to minister publicly to us. It's a frightening responsibility if you think about it for too long.

And if you believe, as I do, that all Christians are called to be ministers in one shape or form, those of us who get to dress up in special robes on Sundays and preen ourselves in the pulpit are not alone in that.

The Bible teaches that all believers are witnesses or ambassadors for Christ. What we say and do reflects not just on ourselves or on the particular church that we belong to, but on our Lord Jesus himself.

[4 : 00] Apostolic integrity in ministry, as my rather stern sermon title puts it then, is something that concerns every Christian.

So we all have something to learn from our reading from 1 Thessalonians 2. And I want to suggest that the main lessons can be categorized under three main headings, all with two M's, just as I was taught at Regent.

Motives for ministry, methods of ministry, and marks of ministry. That's motives for ministry, methods of ministry, and marks of ministry.

So let's begin with the question of motives, which is so very crucial. A report in the U.S. Today newspaper a few years back quoted Drs. Hillel Finestone and David Conta of the University of

Western Ontario.

And they argued that medical doctors should take acting lessons so that they could pretend that they were concerned about their patients.

[5 : 14] The two doctors were not being facetious. We do not put forward this idea cynically, they said. Acting classes should be required in medical school so doctors can learn just when to provide a perfectly timed, compassionate look or a touch on the hand.

An accompanying commentary from Great Britain by Dr. Chris McManus of St. Mary's Hospital Medical School in London brought another perspective on the issue.

Acting may ultimately save doctors who are at risk of professional burnout, he wrote. As far as I know, feigning compassion is yet to be taught in many seminaries.

But I would guess that more than a few of us have done a bit of acting ourselves over the years, especially when ministering to people we find more difficult.

The difference is, of course, that we know that this is not ideal and we understand that right motives are very important. The Apostle Paul certainly knew that and he goes to great lengths in our passage to defend his own record.

[6 : 33] What is more, the reasons that he does so lie in the historical background to 1 Thessalonians, which we need to explore for a couple of minutes if we're to make much sense of what Paul says.

The Apostle first visited the city of Thessalonica, which was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia in what is now northern Greece, together with Silas and Timothy on his second major missionary journey.

According to Acts 17, and you can look it up afterwards, he preached on at least three Sabbaths there in the Jewish synagogue and there was quite a response.

Some Jews became Christians, as did a great many Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But there was also opposition to Paul's ministry right from this outset.

As commentator Leon Morris notes, the Jewish community did not take kindly to losing a considerable number of adherents. They reacted with violence and incited the rabble to attack the house of Jason, Paul's host.

[7 : 50] They dragged some of the new believers before the city authorities, charging them with causing a public uproar and with disloyalty to the Roman regime.

And when Paul and Silas went on to Berea, these people followed them to raise similar accusations in that city. By the time the apostle writes his first letter to the Thessalonians, probably in about 51 AD, the church in the city seems to have become quite well established.

In fact, Paul, who is now in Corinth, gets encouraging news about the Thessalonians from Timothy and Silas. And he comments on that.

But the opposition has not ceased. The Thessalonian church faces other problems that we'll no doubt be hearing in future weeks of this series.

But amidst all this, some local people appear to have continued their campaign against the Christians by impugning Paul's personal integrity.

[8 : 59] Judging from the charges that the apostle seems to be responding to in our passage, they are questioning his honesty. They are alleging greed and self-serving behaviour on Paul's part.

They may even be denying the divine source of his gospel message. And to judge from verse 16, they're doing all this quite aggressively.

And how does the apostle respond? Basically, he conducts a vigorous self-defence, beginning with the matter of his motives for ministry.

Paul starts in verses 1 and 2 by noting the success of his first visit to them, despite earlier problems in Philippi, and the great opposition, those are Paul's words, that they faced in Thessalonica itself.

Then the apostle makes a series of statements that underline the integrity of his ministry. So in verse 2, we read that Paul has depended on God from whom he has drawn courage.

[10 : 14] In verse 4, the apostle affirms that, and I quote, just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak to please God who tests our hearts.

Throughout then, the emphasis is on God. It is God who gives him the gospel, and God whom he aims to please in proclaiming it, just as it is God in whom he trusts as he does so.

Last but not least, Paul writes quite passionately of his compassion and concern for the Thessalonians. We were gentle among you, he says in verses 7 and 8, like a nurse taking care of

her 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.

Because you had become very dear to us. The apostle strikes a similar note in verse 11, if you look there, where he describes himself as like a father with his children.

[11 : 30] Like a father with his children. So if we want to summarize Paul's motives for ministry as he portrays them in this passage, there are really two main themes that emerge and they both center on love.

Love for God and love for others. For it is out of love that he seeks to minister and as he runs through other possibilities, he also provides a very searching checklist of alternatives.

Look at verse 3. Our appeal does not spring from error or uncleanness, nor is it made with guile. Would that we could all always say the same.

Or verse 4. We speak not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts. And what a challenge that can be sometimes.

For we never use either words of flattery, as you know, as we read in verses 5 and 6. Or a cloak for greed as God is our witness.

[12 : 38] Nor did we seek glory from men, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. Finally, listen to the second part of verse 9.

We worked night and day, Paul says, that we might not burden any of you while we preach to you the gospel of God. Again, if we pull all this together, what the apostle has to say about false motivations for ministry ultimately centres on a very simple idea, which is that of self-gratification. It is quite possible to minister to others in order to try to win their approval or applause. It may sound somewhat unlikely for those of us who work in the Anglican Church of Canada, but we can also be motivated by greed or the simple desire to earn a living.

We can even try to take advantage of our position to secure certain perks or privileges. But whenever we do that kind of thing, of course, we're not showing true integrity in ministry.

We're not following the highest of motives, which is Christian love. If we love God, we will want to serve him. And if we love others, we will want to share God's love with them.

[14 : 06] That's what gospel ministry is really all about. And if we follow those motivations, we will not go far wrong. The apostles' teachings on methods of ministry, to come to my second point, are similarly direct.

We lay a great deal of emphasis on results in most walks of life nowadays, but means can be just as important as ends when it comes to ministry.

David or I might preach a very good sermon on Sunday morning. Of course, David's much more likely to do that than I am. But if you found that we were borrowing other people's messages, you probably wouldn't be very happy.

You might put a million dollars in the collection plate one day. In fact, I'm sure that the trustees would be very happy if you did. But if they learned that the money was stolen, they'd probably think again.

To give one last, equally frivolous example, the choirs may sound like choirs of angels here at St. John's, as of course they do. But if we learned that Ed Norman was actually playing CDs up in the organ loft every Sunday and that they were just lip syncing, we'd be likely to change our opinions.

[15 : 32] Now, in ministry, how we do it is just as important as what we do. That's why Paul goes to such lengths, I think, to talk about his methods. So he tells of his courage and boldness in verse 2.

As we've heard, he speaks of his integrity in verses 3 through 6 and of his gentleness in verse 7. He asks the Thessalonians to remember his labour and toil in verse 9.

Last but not least, he writes of his holiness of life in verse 10. You are witnesses, he says, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our behaviour to you believers.

You are witnesses and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our behaviour to you believers. That's quite a claim if you think about it.

If we're honest, it may also sometimes strike us perhaps as a little pompous or even boastful.

Unfortunately, we haven't really had the opportunity to get to know each other very well, but if I stood up and made a similar statement here this morning, you'd probably start to wonder what I'd been up to.

[16:54] But in 1 Thessalonians, we're hearing the words of the Apostle Paul, not John Oaks, and remember his situation. There he is, miles away in Corinth, but facing direct attacks on his ministry by people who are intent on undermining it.

There he is, forced to defend himself because the gospel itself is at stake and whatever he says, whatever claims he makes, can be easily checked by the people to whom he is writing.

If Paul's behaviour has been anything less than holy and righteous and blameless, his readers will easily be able to pick him up on that. But we have no evidence that they do.

And that, of course, is the point. The big question for all of us in ministry is not whether we can lay claim to apostolic integrity, but whether we can be justified in doing so.

In other words, are we walking the talk? Are we putting our money where our mouths are? If we are, then all well and good. But if not, then no amount of self-pleading will ever make up the deficit.

[18:12] No, just as our motives for ministry are to be pure, so our conduct in ministry is to be impeccable. We all make mistakes and no one is ever perfect.

But we tend to recognise true integrity when we see it, because the evidence of it is very hard to dispute. Which brings me to the last main point that I want to highlight from our passage and the issue of what I've called marks of ministry.

Marks of ministry. As I was preparing for this sermon, I came across the following job descriptions for church staff. And I quote, Senior pastor, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, more powerful than a locomotive, faster than a speeding bullet, walks on water, gives counsel to God.

Associate pastor, able to leap short buildings in a single bound, as powerful as a switch engine, just as fast as a speeding bullet, walks on water when the sea is calm, talks with God.

Youth pastor, runs into small buildings, recognises locomotive two out of three times, uses a squirt gun, knows how to use the water fountain, mumbles to himself.

[19:50] None of this is intended to imply any comment on the St. John's staff, of course. Church secretary lifts buildings to walk under them, kicks locomotives off the track, catches speeding bullets in her teeth, freezes water with a single glance.

when God speaks, she says, may I ask who's calling? It can be very easy to fall into the trap of having unrealistic expectations of each other.

And it's important to remember that integrity and faithfulness in ministry are no guarantee of results, even in a parish like St. John's where we have so often come to expect high standards.

But it is fair to say, I think, that if our ministries are built on solid foundations, they are much more likely to succeed, just as Paul's did in Thessalonica.

That's why he's able to thank God in verse 13, that when the Thessalonians received the word of God, which they heard from him, they accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in believers.

[21:18] No preacher could ask for anything more. That's also why he is able to applaud his readers for remaining faithful in times of persecution, as he does in verses 14 through 16.

In a sense, then, the Thessalonians' successes are testimonies to the effectiveness of his ministry and ultimately, of course, and this is very important, to the work of God through him.

They are marks of his apostolic ministry and vivid reminders of what can happen by the grace of God when a minister's motives and methods show appropriate integrity.

All in all, then, our passage from 1 Thessalonians 2 has much to teach us, but I want to draw to a close by focusing for a brief minute or two on a couple of points.

They both have to do with our motives for ministry, where the example of the Apostle Paul can so clearly challenge us all. It's fair to say, I think, that those of us who are of a more conservative theological persuasion find ourselves in a difficult situation, not only in society at large, but in the Anglican Church of Canada right now, where our motivations are sometimes being questioned.

[22:44] on issues like the blessing of same-sex unions, where most of us simply think that we are trying to maintain biblical standards.

We can be labeled intolerant bigots or even worse. We can be accused not only of ignorance, but of a basic lack of compassion.

There are many different ways that we can respond to such charges, but some are better than others. and one of the most profitable is to do all that we can personally to make sure of our motives.

In other words, are we ministering out of love rather than fear or prejudice? Are we trying to please God or each other?

Are we willing to speak the truth no matter the cost? Are we ready to be politically incorrect for the sake of the Gospel? are we moved ultimately by compassion for those beyond our walls?

[23 : 48] And it can be helpful to ask the same kinds of questions about our everyday ministries in the local church. You don't need me to tell you that we all have gifts for ministry and we all have a part to play.

But what really motivates us? Are we out to glorify God or ourselves? Do we minister to others because we love them and because we want to help them or because it makes us feel better? In our worship, are we performing for each other or going through the motions or are we bringing God a sacrifice of praise and serving Him in spirit and in truth?

In our stewardship, are we cheerful givers or reluctant donors? Do the contents of our wallets ultimately belong to God?

In our Bible studies, are we out to impress others or eager to receive God's truth in our hearts? In our evangelism, do we have what Lewis Palau once called a genuine heart for the world or are we just looking to carve a few more notches on our spiritual guns?

[25 : 03] Are our homes nurseries of grace? Do we share our faith at work or do we hide our light under the desk so as not to offend?

We could ask such questions about everything that we do and they really all come down to the same issue if you think about it. Are we showing apostolic integrity in ministry or something less? in that sense I want to suggest that this morning's passage from 1 Thessalonians 2 has a word of challenge for us all.

God has given us so very, very much and we can never, ever repay the debt. But what are we doing in return and why?

Let's bow our heads. Loving God, we thank you for your tremendous gifts to us and above all this morning for the gift of your only son who came to live and suffer and die and rise again that we might be saved from the penalty and power of sin.

[26 : 19] Lord, we recognize that nothing that we ever do can ever earn that or repay it in any shape or form. But we do ask, Lord, this morning that you would help us to minister to you and to others out of love.

And may we glorify you in all our ministries, every one of us. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.