

# The Gospel and Service

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[ 0 : 00 ] The Apostle Paul who wrote this letter is regarded as one of the most influential people in the history of humanity. He's often ranked up there in the list that the people make of these things.

He's in the top 50 or 25 or 10 and on some list he's regarded in the top five of the most influential people in human history.

What is remarkable about that is that Paul didn't have political power. He didn't have armies at his command. He wasn't a wealthy man. He had lots of money at his disposal.

He didn't have any position of authority and yet he changed the course of human history. In fact he was the most significant Christian missionary in the first century.

So how did he become so influential even 2,000 years later when he had nothing of the trappings of power?

[ 1 : 05 ] And in fact not just that but the content of the message that he spread as a missionary in the Roman Empire was entirely unpalatable to both Jew and Gentile.

In other words it wasn't a message that anyone in the first century said, Oh, that's a good idea. Yes, there's logic there. No one.

Richard Stengel was the managing editor of Time magazine from 2006 to 2013. And in the introduction of Time magazine's 2007 list of the 100 most influential people in the world.

In that moment he actually gives us a clue as to the substantial influence of the Apostle Paul. He wrote this. Influence is hard to measure.

And what we look for is people whose ideas, whose example, whose talent, whose discoveries transform the world we live in. Influence is less about hard power of force than the soft power of ideas and example.

[ 2 : 22 ] Yes, there are presidents and dictators who can change the world through fear. But we're more interested in innovators. So what he's saying there is in the 2007 list of most influential people in the world is that power changes people from the outside in.

Conformity, coercion. But influence through ideas and example changes people from the inside out. And if you can change someone from the inside out, you get genuine change, not just compliance.

Genuine change happens from the inside out as a person's heart and mind and the driving force of their life is changed. And we see in today's passage is that the startling endurance and influence of the Apostle Paul is a life of sacrificial service.

And a message that declares that Paul himself and all people have been served by God. That's the astounding influence.

So I've got three points today. And Paul here is defending his ministry amongst the Thessalonian church and giving us an example to follow in how we might follow in his steps and see more and more people influence for the sake of God.

- [ 3 : 56 ] And so three points, love deeply, speak the truth and receive the crown. That's where we're heading today. Now the first thing we learn here in Paul's defence to the Thessalonians is that he served them and others by loving them deeply.
- The language is very strong. Paul's life is bound up to their life. He was so personally invested in them that when they were persecuted, when they were struggling, when they were hurting, so was he.
- So was he. It's sort of, you know, you put money into a business venture. When it fails, when the business venture fails, you fail financially.
- That is, you're bound to that business venture. If it financially loses, you financially lose. If it financially gains, you financially gain. And Paul does the same here with the lives of these Thessalonians.
- His investment to them is absolutely remarkable. Chapter 2, verse 17. Brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time, in person, not in thought.
- [ 5 : 10 ] That his concept here is he was torn. He was torn away from them. He was bereft of them.
- He was orphaned. He was ripped away from them in person, but not in thought. Or quite literally, that I was ripped away from you in person, but my heart was still attached to you.
- The image that he's using here is like the death of a loved one. I lost your presence, but my heart and my life and my emotions is still bound to you.
- That's the image here. So strong. That's the grief he is feeling. And what he's expressing here is so rare these days when it comes to church.
- We don't often even come to church with the longing expectations to see each other because we haven't done so in the last seven days.
- [ 6 : 27 ] It is possible, in fact, to have enduring connections with another person over a very long period of time, but still have a barrier between your heart and theirs.
- Too often our joy is not bound up in their joy, nor our pain in their pain. It's much easier, I think, in today's day and age to, in fact, provide a meal than it is to give a heart.
- To provide our hearts to bind our time for those who are suffering and afflicted. Paul then adds, Out of our intense longing, we made every effort to see you.
- The statement there, our intense longing, literally means in the New Testament an over-desire. It's normally translated in a variety of ways in the New Testament.
- But the concept of an over-desire is the idea of an idolatry in the heart. But the intense desire here expresses a very strong passion.
- [ 7 : 57 ] And virtually everywhere in the New Testament, this word, this statement is used negatively. Only here and a couple of other places is it ever used positively.
- And it's the word translated lust. Lust. He is so bound to these Christians that he is lusting after their personal presence.
- There's more in verses 19 and 20. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.
- If their hope and joy is inhibited, so is his. There's even more in chapter 3, verse 8.
- You see, you read in chapter 3, verses 1 to 6, that Paul sent Timothy back to find out how they're getting on in the faith. Since Paul and his team had to leave Thessalonica under persecution.
- [ 9 : 00 ] And Timothy comes back with a report that is so encouraging that Paul writes in verse 8, For now we really live since you are standing firm in the Lord.

It was like a death thinking that you had died in the faith. And now we really live. When Paul thought it was all going wrong for them, and he thought they were turning away from Jesus, he was like he was dying inside.

And the news from Timothy about their progress in the faith means that he really lives. This good report has revived him. What we are seeing here is just how closely Paul has bound himself to his fellow believers, brothers and sisters in Christ.

He loved them deeply. Now we exist in a time and a culture where everything is telling us to hold ourselves back.

The safest option for you in life is to not love anyone. You don't want your heart broken, don't love anyone as C.S. Lewis said.

[ 10 : 20 ] Hold ourselves back. Protect your hearts. Don't give yourself away. And so we don't invest in others unless there is some level of personal benefit out of it.

And there's most likely a raft of reasons for it in Western culture. We are encouraged again and again and again to pursue your self-actualisation.

It's about you achieving who you are, regardless of people. It could be that there's past hurts from broken relationships. Things like divorce do untold damage to our hearts.

Not just those who are being divorced, but everyone around them. It means it's difficult to trust and invest in others. The death of a loved one caused the heart not to want to hurt again.

It becomes so fragile to hurt again. Cancer culture makes us fearful of getting too close and revealing our heart too much. Our mobile society of people moving regularly.

[ 11 : 28 ] Even if they don't move house, moving jobs, moving churches, has taught us that people aren't going to be in my life for too long. So don't invest too much.

There are so many reasons why we have developed Teflon in our hearts. And so when we get too close to someone else, they just slip off.

Don't get too close. Don't get too close. Don't invest too much. And it's self-preservation is the reason. So many reasons why we should push against the trends of individualism and transactional relationships and shallow interactions and isolationism.

One of the main reasons is because you need it. Personally, we all need it. That is, none of us will see any change in our lives at all if we keep beating people at arm's length.

We need them as much as they need us. No one changes, me or you, without others. And unless we invest in others by giving self away to them and loving them like Paul does, we ourselves will never change.

[ 12 : 51 ] That's the first thing, love deeply. That's the remarkable impact of Paul's influence was his example in loving others sacrificially. But giving himself to the Thessalonians were not the only aspects of his service and remarkable influence.

He gave away his heart, but he also spoke the truth. And this one, I think, when you put these two together, it's very interesting. It's rare, so rare.

Paul is clearly emotionally connected to them. He's given his heart to them. He wasn't disconnected from them relationally. He wasn't just an academic or someone with their ideas.

He had example in his life. But that in itself is not enough. Sacrificial love for someone in itself is not enough. And it does not explain in itself the remarkable influence of his life.

If that was it, you could conclude that Paul was emotionally reliant upon them. That is, the reason he so gave himself to other people was because his ego was so fragile, he needed their affirmation and love back.

[ 14 : 14 ] We see here that Paul gives them his heart and his life, and he speaks the truth. Someone with a fragile ego does not do that.

That's how he served them. And it's the secret of his great influence. Have a look at verse 10, chapter 3. Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

New Testament scholar Leon Morris says the statement, what is lacking, means quite literally deficiency, shortcomings. He wrote, in spite of his great enthusiasm for the spiritual achievement of these converts, Paul recognises that they come short of what they should be.

Paul's saying here in this letter, my heart burns, it burns to see you again so that I can address your shortcomings. How would you receive a letter like that?

We're longing to see you, Steve, so that I can point out where you're wrong. Delete.

[ 15 : 29 ] That's the instinct of the heart, is it not? Paul hasn't loved them in the hope that they're going to love him back. He hasn't sacrificed for them so that they could puff up his ego and make him feel important.

He is giving of himself, is not hiding something of a deeper motive for their approval and affirmation. He isn't afraid to bring feedback.

He isn't afraid to bring truth. He isn't afraid to tell them, you need to take your next steps, to live what it is that you believe.

Crucially though, it's not just his opinion. It's not just his truth. He's just not someone here who, you know, I'm loving you and you're not responding the way I want you to, so let me just, let me just shed some light for you.

He's not trying to attack them. He's not trying to tear them down. He's not trying, it's not revenge. It's not payback. Back in chapter two, verse 13, he is thankful because the Thessalonians received the word of God, which you heard from us.

[ 16 : 49 ] You accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. He wants to come to bring God's word to bear on their life, that they might progress in the faith.

That's his service, not just in serving and loving them, with his life, but with the gospel, the word of God. The late theologian J.R. Packer wrote that preaching is the event of God bringing to an audience or a congregation, a Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting message of instruction from himself through the words of a spokesperson.

What he unpacked there was the preacher doesn't bring a message about God. God brings a message to the people through the preacher.

That's what he's saying. Every time the church gathers under God's word, in corporate worship, every time you meet together as a community group, you are experiencing a word mediator encounter between your soul and the living God as the scriptures are open.

And the whole purpose of it is life-impacting instruction. Transformation is the word that Packer would use.

[ 18 : 32 ] Paul gave his life to them and spoke the truth of God's word to them for their progress in holiness and joy in Christ.

That is his remarkable service. Not just an example, but a message. He wasn't seeking the transfer of information.

The goal was transformation, bringing God's word to bear for progress. I remember sitting on the bank of the Namoi River, fishing one afternoon with the pastor of the church in Narrabri as I was a very young trainee under him, talking loads of questions.

And he said to me, Steve, as a pastor, if this is what you're going to do for the rest of your life, you really have one job.

And that is to bring God's word to bear in the life of the people who are there. And you do that, not just through teaching, but through a life that's living it.

[ 19 : 43 ] I think that's what Paul's saying here to the Thessalonians. Paul is modelling, I think, a very rare balance in terms of personality. Some of us like the first bit about Paul loving people.

You know, we have a natural disposition towards kindness and gentleness and love and compassion for people. It's who we are. And normally, in that scenario, those who have such a deep compassion and forgiveness find it hard to bring God's word to bear.

Find it hard to speak truth. I find it hard to see someone make actual progress. You might be able to see error.

You might be able to see patterns of behaviour, bad behaviour, and say nothing. It's just more loving to have compassion on the person than to speak truth. That is, some of us are quick to compassion, but slow to assessment and seeking, bringing God's word to bear for progress.

others have a natural disposition towards logic and facts and arguments and truth and theology, much slower towards compassion.

[ 20 : 58 ] You need to know something. There's something I need to tell you. Quick on assessment, but slow on compassion. As I said at the beginning of this year, King of Our Vision series, that's my natural bent.

That's who I am. God's working on me, but it's my natural bent. All of us are like, I forget who used this illustration, we're all like the drunk peasant.

We fall off one side of the donkey or the other. None of us can stay up straight on one way or another. Whatever your natural bent is, you need to be pushed in the other direction.

Love without truth and truth without love are both distortions. And neither of them brings about the change in life, in our life or the life of others, that the Apostle Paul had on the Thessalonian church and on human history.

One of the greatest examples of someone who was closer to staying up straight on the donkey was, and therefore a challenge for me personally, the famous English pastor, John Newton of Amazing Grace, him fame.

[ 22 : 11 ] He was a, if you read his life, he was a, he was formerly a slave trader and in fact, a very cruel slave trader who mistreated people brutally, so badly.

And then he met Jesus. And as a pastor, people who, not just his friends, but people who disagree with him theologically or thought he was weak personally, they, as a pastor, he was described as someone who had a theological backbone of steel, so fixed on speaking truth, but a heart of tenderness, like clover, described by one biographer as a mighty, you know, the massive trees in California, redwood, massive redwood of theological truth and conviction, and yet like a field of clover with a heart towards his pastor, towards his people.

He did not string back from proclaiming the truth of God's word to correct, but it came from a heart and a life and actions of compassion. I want to be more like him.

I want us as a church family to be more like that, to be known for that. Church that gives itself in love for all, the joy of all people while speaking the truth of the gospel and not shrinking back from that at all.

That brings me to the last point. Why would we want to do that? We actually sung it in one of our songs, I saw it there right at the beginning, about the world needs to know.

[ 24 : 01 ] What is it? Why would we want to pursue such a life? This is the fight. What Paul had here was he actually had a vision for everyone's life, for all relationships, for all people.

He had a particular vision for their life. Chapter 2, verses 19 and 24. What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ when he comes?

Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and our joy. When he writes, you are our glory and joy, he means that the life that you are living, Thessalonians, are doing us credit.

You're imitating the gospel. It means that they were clearly a product not just of his life, but also his message.

And it validated his service of them. As I said last week, we know that Paul is defending his pastoral ministry amongst the Thessalonians, and he's setting an example really for pastors in this, but not just that.

[ 25 : 22 ] We know it's crucial that the life of the pastor matches the message that they preach, that they're in sync.

Belief and behavior must align. But it's also not just for the pastors. He's writing to the Thessalonians church that your belief and your behaviors are aligned.

So I want to ask you, have you ever thought about that? Have you ever thought about how you reflect the gospel that is preached here week in and week out in this church?

When someone not known to us walks in amongst us, is there sometimes, and I do this myself, I sometimes go, I hope it's a good day.

Nothing goes wrong. I hope the preacher, normally me, makes sense. I hope the music's good.

[ 26 : 28 ] I hope the video works this week. The slides appear when they're made. I hope it works well. And the idea is, behind all that, that somehow that might be an influence on those people.

Do you ever think that maybe people aren't just looking at me and what happens on the platform, that they're actually looking around at you too, assessing you as well?

Do these people's lives reflect the priority of the gospel message that's currently being preached? Do their hearts appear to be lifted to this message?

That's what Paul's actually saying here in verses 19 and 20. There is a sense where a church, a congregation, is the minister's glory and joy.

And why should anyone listen to and honour the gospel if the Christian community does not reflect it in any way? Why would I believe that when it doesn't seem to impact here?

[ 27 : 39 ] And he's saying something even more than that. He's saying that he and his team live because the Thessalonians stand firm in the Lord.

Remarkable. Absolutely remarkable. Paul gives them his life and God's word for their progress in the faith.

He is so bound up in their life that if they're not progressing in their faith, he himself is dying. So discouraged.

There is, I can tell you this because I've done it for three decades. There is nothing more discouraging to a minister of the word. Nothing more draining than to preach your heart out week after week, year after year and see no change.

See no change. I've been there. I'm not there at the moment. I want you to know I'm not there although I do have fleeting moments.

[ 28 : 53 ] Generally don't talk to me until midday Monday morning. Please do though if there is an emergency. I'd be more than happy to. But as a general rule, there's a slump on a Monday.

It's an all minister thing. But I read during the week a sermon that Charles Spurgeon once preached on this passage. And specifically just on verse 8 of chapter 3.

For now we really live since you are standing firm in the Lord. And he said this to his church in that sermon. I live by your spiritual joy.

I suffocate under your spiritual indifference. I choke to death on your spiritual misery. I am tied to you. I can't help it.

That is why Paul calls the Thessalonians his joy and glory.

[ 29 : 55 ] His service of them, his vision for them to not just start as Christians but to make progress in the faith in such a way that they cross the finish line.

It's there at the end of verse 19. We will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes. Paul there is referring to the future when Jesus Christ comes back, breaks into human history at the end of time as we know it, winds up things as we know it.

Paul's vision for the Thessalonians is that they would be his crown on that day. And he says the same thing at the end of chapter 3. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus Christ comes with all his holy ones.

Notice the word blameless there. That's his goal for the Thessalonian church. Blameless and holy in the presence of God. And he uses the same word in Ephesians chapter 5 when he writes to husbands, husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy to present her to himself as a radiant church holy and blameless.

so this passage is not just about you know ministers be like me pastors do what I do it's actually about relationships within the church it's about every relationship and it is absolutely remarkable that what Paul does here in using the word blameless he actually connects the goal of our relationship as a church family with the goal of Christian marriage and that is to present each other perfect in Christ blameless in Christ has the same purpose the same commitment the same goal the final glory of each other not my final glory but the final glory of each other in the presence of God and so why would Paul do that why would he serve the Thessalonians why would he give himself away why would he risk them being ticked off with him because he speaks the truth of God's word to them as he has suffered persecution throughout the Roman Empire already because of this gospel his life of service in love and truth was not a principle it was not an ideal he wasn't brought up by his parents saying

[ 32 : 48 ] Paul when you grow up be a person of service of others it's not like it was a value that was instilled to him it was not his natural disposition he was a lecturer!

a lawyer a legalist he persecuted Christians he was brutal he did not have a victim mentality what drove him the gospel message that he spread throughout the Roman Empire it's about what Jesus has already done for him at the beginning of chapter 3 Paul talks about his loss his pain the great risk he took as he sent Timothy back to the Thessalonians to as he says to strengthen and encourage them in their faith in the hope that it would not be a vanity that their faith in Jesus would not be a vanity Paul Paul talks about the great loss of sending Timothy so dear to him so loved to him and in 1 Timothy chapter 1 verse 2 he calls him my true son in the faith and he sent

Timothy away his love for the Thessalonians sent him away sent Timothy his son away and in doing that he's reflecting the gospel that saved him for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life it's the sending of the son of God Jesus Christ as a sacrifice for the sin of all humanity that changed absolutely everything for Paul Jesus Christ according to Hebrews chapter 12 is the author and the perfecter of our faith Jesus has lived the life of trust in his father that we should have lived and he died the death that we should have died because we have failed to do that and as Jesus was crucified on the cross his enemies mocked him they mocked him for his claim to be the king of all kings and so they wound together a crown of thorns and stuck it on his head there's your crown the king of the universe the one who owns absolutely everything the one who flung stars into space and put the planets in their orbit the one worthy of all praise of all honour of all glory the one who already had the ultimate crown the greatest crown surrendered his hands and his feet to nails on a cross he lay aside his power he lay aside his glory he lay aside his crown why

Hebrews 12 for the joy that was set before him and the joy that was set before him the vision that was before him the goal that was before him the aim of his life of his death that was before him was to bring us back to God holy and blameless that was the goal that was his vision that was his joy he gave away his life with joy so that we might receive forgiveness his approval the presence of the holy spirit eternal life and that we might receive the crown that will never perish spoil fate he lay aside his crown that we might have his see Jesus had a vision for what Paul could be at the throne of God and that broke into the heart of Paul and entirely changed his life and Paul had a vision for what the Thessalonians could be at the throne of God and Paul gave away his life for them and our vision for each other should be the same vision of what we could be each of us before the throne of God Paul's joy and goal is their final glory their crown he is so filled with joy that they make that they are making progress he is longing for them to see them to just continue to take their next steps next steps and so chapter 3 right at the very end there is Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians it's a summary of his service to them and he and he prays that they will do the same for each other may the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else just as ours does for you may he strengthen your hearts so that you'll be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus Christ comes with all his holy ones won't