

The Gospel and Integrity

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. I've met you before, my name's Steve, lead pastor here at St Paul's, and we're continuing on in our series in Thessalonians. You may have heard a statement, you hear it in social media, in the media a little bit nowadays.

The statement, the question is, where are all the leaders? Where have they gone? In fact, it's a statement which has been given a rise really since the 1990s as people, there's this perception as you look out in society, you look in business world, other things like that, is where are the leaders in a traditional sense, the leaders, people of integrity, people of vision, people who actually are not in the position of leadership, a personal gain, but for the overall good of society, where are those leaders?

You look in the political realm, there's a great deal of distrust in institutions and the political realm because of the sense that we're in this role and the extent of our vision is the next election campaign to ensure that we stay in power.

Where are the leaders? And that's certainly the case as well when you look at the Christian church. Where are the leaders in the Christian church?

In fact, in recent weeks, a Christian pastor and his wife in Denver, Colorado, have been accused of a cryptocurrency scam and using the proceeds to pay for home renovations and vacations.

[1 : 4 1] The couple were indicted on 40 counts of theft, security fraud and racketeering. Prosecutors in Colorado say that the couple solicited \$3.4 million, US dollars, from investors for a business venture that they'd set up, but only a very small amount of that money actually went to the business venture, which actually failed.

Instead, they spent at least \$1.3 million on personal expenses, home renovations, because in their words, to their defence, God told them to do it.

They spent the money on airline tickets, hotel rooms, high-end merchandise and other personal expenses.

Where are the leaders? You see, when Christians, let alone Christian leaders, when Christians live lives that is inconsistent with what they believe, they believe this great stuff and yet they behave in this particular way, what it does is it drags the credibility of not just the Christian church, but in particular the Christian faith, into the gutter.

And it weakens the faith of so many people. So you may recall from last week, the Apostle Paul took the message of Christianity to the city of Thessalonica about 20 years after the crucifixion of Jesus.

[3 : 1 8] People became Christians and the city went into a riot. And so Paul and his team had to escape under the cover of darkness for their life.

And so what this did was, Paul's gone, small church in Thessalonica is being hammered, and it gave Paul's opponents some ammunition.

They attempted to undermine the faith of these new believers by discrediting Paul. And so reading between the lines, you can imagine them saying something like, Paul, really?

You want to believe what he'd said to you? He ran. Haven't heard from him since. He wasn't sincere. He was just one of those phony philosophers that come through Thessalonica as part of the empire, dropping in.

He's a charlatan. He's in it for what he gets out of it. He was looking to raise funds from you. He was looking for sex, for prestige, for power, for money.

[4 : 27] And at the first sign of trouble, he's gone. On to the next town to do exactly the same thing. He doesn't care about you at all. Why would you give yourselves to the message that he brought when he himself is gone?

And so what we have here is Paul's defence of his ministry and his gospel.

So three points up there on the screen, Paul's argument, Paul's appeal, and Paul's approval. That's what we're going to journey through in the first 12 verses here. So as Paul defends himself, and he's doing it really in chapters 2 and 3, what he's doing here, he's not just giving us a philosophy of Christian ministry and what might be expected of those in Christian service, but he's also giving us a pattern for the Christian life.

You know, as I go through this, and you know, I already feel this passage challenges me a lot and in the past week, but it's not just about, ah, that's what we expect of our pastors.

It's also a challenge for all Christians. They have a lot to say of what it means to live the Christian life. Now, the way he defends himself here, his argument is simply by reminding the Thessalonians what they already know.

[5 : 57] Six times, verses 1, 2, 5, 9, 10, and 11, Paul says, you know, you remember, you are witnesses. He is simply reminding them of what they actually saw, what they heard, what they experienced from Paul.

A life that was in fact consistent with the message that he proclaimed. He is open, he's transparent.

So, there's three things. So, the first thing we notice in terms of his argument, he really points to three things in terms of consistency. Number one, his courage. Verses 1 and 2, you know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results.

We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi. As you know, with the help of our God, we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition.

The word dared there means that he spoke freely, openly, and fearlessly. It is to be outspoken.

[7 : 08] It is to be frank. It is to use clarity in his speech. That is, it is to speak with courage regardless of consequences.

He courageously spoke the gospel of Jesus Christ to them and he did it despite, in his words, previously suffered and being treated outrageously in Philippi.

So, what he's saying here is, when I turned up in Thessalonica, as you know, I was bruised, beaten.

He would have had potentially broken bones. The bruises, the damage to his body were obvious because he was humiliated. He was stripped naked.

He was beaten. He was flogged. He was thrown into prison in Philippi. He would have turned up with the damage to his body and he preached the gospel to them again and again.

[8 : 14] The thing that, that caused him so much pain and humiliation in Philippi, he turns up to Thessalonica and does it again. And when he left there, he did it again.

There's his courage. That's against the accusation that he's in it for himself and as soon as trouble hits, he's gone. The second thing that Thessalonians know about Paul is that he did not exploit them for personal gain.

Verse 3, for the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. He did not call them to faith in Jesus Christ to gain a following for himself, to mislead them, to get sexually involved, which is what impure motives means here, to get sexually involved with anyone or to try and deceive them in any way to make him feel like he's more powerful.

He gave the truth and he kept himself pure. He wasn't driven to please people. Verse 4, we're not trying to please God who tests our hearts.

Verse 6, we were not looking for praise from people, not from you or from anyone else. You see, people pleasing usually comes from a place of deep insecurity.

[9 : 49] A people pleaser won't give themselves freely to others. they only give an angle of themselves in the hope that the angle that they give would result in them receiving some form of approval.

And therefore, as a people pleaser, you never really know them. You only know what they want you to know about them in order to extract praise from them. And a people pleaser therefore uses people.

They exploit people so that they feel approved of themselves, pleased with themselves. And so Paul did not flatter or position himself for money.

Verse 5, you know we never use flattery nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed. God is our witness. Flattery is using language not for the sake of truth but for the sake of manipulation.

You want something and in this case Paul's being accused of buttering up the Thessalonians in order to extract money from them.

[11 : 07] The accusation is that Paul wanted their money not their souls. And according to verse 9 that's not the case.

Surely you remember brothers and sisters our toil and our hardship we work night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preach the gospel of God to you.

He was not after their money. He was after their souls for their good. So the Thessalonians know of his courage. They know that his pattern of life was not to exploit them.

But thirdly it wasn't just the things that he did not do. it's what he did do in his pattern of life. He gave himself in the service of others.

Verses 6 to 8 even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority instead we were like young children among you just as a nursing mother cares for her children so we care for you because we loved you so much we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

[12 : 28] What they knew of Paul is he exchanged a relationship of authority and power that is the apostle to a relationship of no rights surrendering of rights a relationship of gentle tender affection and service instead of wielding authority he became like a child in the first century without rights he didn't just come to them with a message but he also gave himself to them the messenger not just words but a life not just doctrines but a heart what he says in verse 7 is quite startling just as a nursing mother cares for her children so we cared for you not just the reference to any mother it's specifically nursing mother the breastfed infant is dependent on the mother's milk for nourishment of life it's a very powerful image that Paul uses of

Christian ministry but also the Christian life the nursing mother is an all consuming role baby requires milk six to ten times a day and we're not feeding the child the mother is caring for the other needs of the child and refueling herself for the next round of feeding it requires around the clock personal sacrifice diet time physical discomfort sleep deprivation emotional strain 24 hour commitment gives herself away mentally physically emotionally and so what Paul is saying here is they know this the Thessalonians know of his gentleness his tenderness his love and his care for them was so deep you see the

Thessalonians are not just a set of employees that need to be trained not just a group of friends that he needs to he has some shared experiences with he empties himself for the sake of these new disciples in Jesus that they might grow and flourish and so verse 9 again surely you remember brothers and sisters our toil and our hardship we work night and day in order not to be burdened to any of you while we preach the gospel to you and then he summarizes his defense in verse 10 you are witnesses and so is God of how holy righteous and blameless we were among you who believed and so with that statement he raises the bar of Christian discipleship and ministry don't balk at this as though he was saying you know Thessalonians that I'm completely sinless that's not what he's saying here at all that's not what he means what he means is we honoured

God in boldly courageously preaching the truth of the gospel we treated people rightly with the gospel and we gave no one a legitimate reason to accuse us of bad behaviour or lacking in integrity what we said we believed and the way it enacted and lived out in our life were consistent he was above reproach that's his argument which then leads us to his appeal he was courageous not for personal gain he answered himself for them now the most common way that these verses are replied when you look at commentators and others is this get preached at a clergy conference for instance these are words for the pastor these are words for

Christian leadership and pastoral ministry and anyone involved in ministry at all and it's true there is an awful lot to be said here and great insights not just in the manner of Christian ministry but the motives of Christian ministry but also the manner and motive of the Christian life you know just leaving it with the pastoral staff and Christian leaders is not the only application here Paul is writing these words to a bunch of new Christians under the sway of people who wanted them to abandon their trust in Jesus and they were doing that by undermining the person who brought the gospel to them and he is writing this letter because he is concerned that it will be in vain if they believe the lies and give in to the pressure it would be a vanity empty of no value if they not only believed the scandal makers but if they didn't follow his pattern of life that would be a vanity that is it would be a total vanity just to say

[18 : 21] I believe in Jesus but I don't live like Jesus so having laid out his defense this is my life you seen it then he calls them to follow suit verse 11 for you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children encouraging comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God who calls you into his kingdom and glory again it's a first century image of the father son relationship where in the first century sons followed their fathers into the family business if the father was a farmer so was the son if the father was a carpenter so was the son until you become the Messiah so was the son that you followed in the family business and so Paul saying to the Thessalonians I am your father you follow me he was tender as he encouraged and comfort these new believers faint hearted under pressure but he was also uncompromising!

his charge to them is to live lives worthy of God who calls you into his kingdom and glory Paul's appeal here is exactly the same as what he wrote in chapter 1 verse 6 we looked at last week you became imitators of us and of the Lord and in these last two verses here he's appealing to them to continue to imitate lest their faith be in vain and he's appealing to his pattern of life as the very thing that they should be imitating not the thing that they should be the reason to reject him but the reason that they should imitate him he has lived amongst them in such a way that he can point to his life and he can say I'm following the pattern of Jesus he's saying to them that his pattern of life is a life that is shaped by in step with the gospel that brought them into

God's kingdom this is crucial for us because for decades in the western world as the gospel has been preached there has been this assumption I suppose or one of the consequences is that the gospel of Jesus Christ the good news of Jesus Christ is a message of sin management come to Jesus have your sins forgiven and get heaven a gospel of sin management you've been what Paul's saying here is the Christian has been rescued from the kingdom of this world and its future judgment and brought into the kingdom of God you haven't just had your sins forgiven and you get the promise of consolation prize of heaven at the end you have transferred from one realm to another from one rule to another from one allegiance to another you have turned away from serving idols to serve the living

God the Christian is in Christ which means they are wrapped up in him in his kingdom a new creation and waiting the final glory of it to be revealed and the life we now live is the life of Jesus Christ being lived out in us and so if we make the assumption well I become a Christian have my sins forgiven and all this other stuff about you know rhythms of patterns of life and discipleship and that's just all optional extra you have a gospel of sin management and it's not the Christian gospel it's significant that Paul writes to the

Thessalonian Christians and says to them God calls you into his kingdom and glory glory he's writing to Christians and he says God calls you into his kingdom and his glory in the original language that is in the present tense in other words to the Christians in Thessalonica to you at St.

[23 : 28] Paul's Chatswood who are in Christ God calls you into his kingdom oh hang on a bit aren't I already in his kingdom it's in the present tense in other words God never stops calling both the non Christian and the Christian into his kingdom he's called to you right now as the text of scripture is opened by his Holy Spirit into his kingdom he's calling you into his kingdom and that call never ceases and it's a call that means to consistently live lives worthy of the kingdom every moment to know who your king is he's calling you into his glory true glory ultimate glory 2 corinthians 4 we looked at this very briefly last week that the gospel of Jesus Christ displays the glory of Christ in other words the sacrifice of

Jesus displays the glory of Christ the glory of God the word glory means weight it means value it means magnificence it means worthiness of Jesus Christ and to have glory is to have prestige to have power to have influence you see the reason why Paul did not see glory from others is because he already had ultimate glory in Jesus and the constant call of God in all of our lives is to enter his spectacular glory under the rule of Christ that's the essence of his appeal in verse 12 to live lives worthy to call that literally means walk worthily!

17 he didn't say to Abraham Abraham somersault before me Abraham do gymnastics in front of me he didn't even say Abraham run a marathon in front of me he called him and this is the first words of calling walk before me faithfully walking is day in day out praying it is day in and day out hearing from God in the scriptures it is day in and day out obeying building and loving Christian friends it is corporate worship it is committing yourself fully completely participating in the life of the church it is generosity it is service it is entrusting the gospel to others it is rhythmic and it is on and on and on to walk with

God is a metaphor that symbolizes slow and steady progress walking with God means it's treating God as God and as if he is there walking with you day by day and so I commend to you our seven rhythms of grace as our expression here at St.

Paul's of Christian living to see each other please God worthy of him to live lives worthy of him and as we practice these seven rhythms they both remind us of the gospel and cause us to walk with the God in a gospel shaped life so God is calling us together at St.

[28 : 23] Paul's into the life of courage of sacrifice and service that Paul models you see his life of integrity is not just in his courage and his life of integrity is not just in what he refused to do in terms of he didn't exploit people he didn't treat people badly his life of integrity is also reflected in what he did in walking with Christ a gospel shaped rhythmic life he's calling us here at St.

Paul's into these kinds of relationships not only because of our need to get these relationships but also of our calling to give these relationships a life of Christian integrity is to give yourself away to put away all deceit and exploitation to renounce people pleasing to be done with flattery and greed to be radically generous with our resources of money and time and energy to express tender mother-like affection and care for all people to be holy righteous and blameless in our conduct to take the risk of sharing our souls with each other and to build spiritual friends to encourage and comfort and urge each other to heed the call of God to walk worthy of and so if you have a gospel of sin management you will say things like

I don't rob anyone I pay my taxes that's not Christian integrity Christian integrity is I don't rob anyone I pay my taxes and I give generously radically generously this brings me to the final point the picture we have here of Paul's openness his tenderness his care his self sacrifice is not how we would imagine the apostle Paul to be Paul was an extremely devout religious man whose zeal led him to savagely persecute Christians in the early church he was a religious man who destroyed lives he's the great intellectual and for many in church history regard Paul to be the man who was a great thinker but just a hard man a hard man so what empowered

Paul to live courageously and sacrificially to give himself away for the sake of others to be so tender and open to others he tells us in verses 18 and 9 the gospel the gospel is the message as I said last week that God out of his unconditional choosing love has given his only son the Lord Jesus Christ to be a substitute for all of humanity Jesus lived a life of absolute integrity sinless blameless perfect in every single way impeccable flawless one of the things that often brought people to the Christian faith and still does today is when you investigate the life of Jesus to try and pull his character apart is absolutely impossible and yet in his own time he was considered mad by his family he was slandered as a lawbreaker by the religious elite accused of being in cahoots with Satan with evil charged with blasphemy!

And he died in full public display of Jerusalem the death of crucifixion the worst death reserved for the worst of criminals humiliated in every way treated as if we as if he's us and it was the plan of God as 2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him the sinner the flawed one the ones lacking every form of integrity might become the righteousness of God as if we are completely right Jesus was despised rejected so that we might be approved he left aside his glory that we might be made glorious Paul's pattern of life comes from a place of certainty and security in Jesus he tells us in verse 4 where does his power come from he's approved by God that's his power the gospel means he's approved by God he is loved accepted approved by God in Jesus

[33 : 52] Christ the praiseworthy one Paul is approved he has received the praise of the praiseworthy the glory of the glorious one Jesus glory became Paul's glory he didn't need to build his reputation he didn't need to prove his worth he didn't need to exploit others in order to advance himself he already had it they couldn't give him anything he was settled he was secure he was loved and so he gave himself away because he was free to do so in Jesus he was free he gave himself away to please God in the service of the gospel and in sacrificial love for people and so Paul's call is our call to us heed the call of

God in these verses to live lives worthy of the God who gave everything for you everything for you take your next step not to seek his approval but to enjoy his approval come under his rule and experience his glory more and more do what Paul did and the writer to the Hebrews calls us to and to fix our gaze on Jesus the pioneer that is the one who sets the pattern for us and the perfecter of the one who fulfilled our walk with God for the joy that was set before him Jesus endured the cross he scorned at shame and he sat down at the right hand of the throne of God consider him who endured such opposition from sinners so that you will not grow weary and lose so that you will continue your walk and to the degree that we look to

Jesus and the gospel of Jesus Christ seeing him doing all of that for us is the degree that we will live lives worthy of him lives of gospel integrity