



1 Thessalonians

Christian Conduct & The Lord's Return

1 Thessalonians 2:1–8

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Introduction

As we move into chapter 2, Paul transitions from being thankful for the Thessalonians to a defense of his ministry while among them. Gospel ministry is not always easy and sometimes may bring questions about the conduct and ministry of those who serve for the sake of the gospel. This study will help us understand what a biblical ministry looks like.

A Defense of Paul's Ministry and Conduct (2:1 – 3:13)

Paul's actions in Thessalonica and afterward had been brought into question by certain opponents in an attempt to discredit Paul's ministry and gain a following. But Paul felt compelled to defend himself because his ministry and the gospel were intrinsically linked.

Paul's Ministry in Thessalonica (2:1–16)

Paul counters his opponents by pointing out that his actions were wholly consistent with the gospel he preached and that the Thessalonians were eyewitnesses of his ministry. Several times throughout this section, Paul uses the phrase “as you know,” showing that the Thessalonians were able to corroborate his account. In defending his actions, Paul focuses on the characteristics and motives of his conduct, providing us with a model for biblical ministry.

A Description of Paul's Ministry and Conduct (2:1–12)

Paul begins by listing out several details of the kind of ministry he had among the Thessalonians.

Characteristics of Paul's Ministry (vv. 1–2)

In verse 1, we learn that Paul's visit to the Thessalonians was not in vain (i.e. empty, hollow, without effect). Paul's visit was purposeful and productive as evidenced in chapter one (1:5, 9). But not only was it a fruitful ministry, it was surprising that it even occurred in the first place. In verse 2, Paul uses a grammatical tool called a concessive clause. When translating the verse, we could easily plug in the words

“although...nevertheless” with each clause. The idea is that the second clause is true *in spite of* the first clause. We might have expected Paul to give up after his severe treatment in Philippi. But his faithfulness and boldness in proclaiming the true gospel ensured that the truth continued to spread in spite of severe persecution.

Motives Behind Paul’s Ministry (vv. 3–8)

In these verses, Paul answers a question from verse 2: Why was Paul bold in the face of such severe persecution? The answer lies in Paul’s underlying motives. Under each of the subheadings below, you will notice that Paul includes a denial of negative conduct and an affirmation of positive conduct.

A Desire to Please God (vv. 3–4)

Paul begins with a threefold denial of wrong motives. Note how each is inconsistent with his actions:

- The gospel was not based on *error*. If his message was false, he would not have been bold.
- The second term can have a general sense of *improper motives*, or a more specific sense of *uncleanness* (sexual immorality). Neither of these could be used to describe Paul’s ministry.
- He did not have the *intent to deceive*. He did not employ trickery to deceive his audience.

All three of these terms were used to describe religious charlatans that dotted the landscape of the 1st century Mediterranean world. Paul’s opponents had linked him with these, and so he set out to expressly deny this. The charges were easy to levy against him since the problem was so widespread. In today’s culture, religious charlatans still dot the landscape. Charges like this can be difficult to counter. The best thing we can do is follow Paul’s example. He constantly called on the Thessalonians to affirm his defense. The point is that if Paul had been guilty of *any* of these problems, he would not have been bold.

Contrary to those things, Paul affirms his true motive for engaging in gospel ministry. Being “approved by God” is a reference back to his commissioning as an apostle on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–19). Paul’s conduct in ministry was in a manner fully consistent with God’s commission to preach the gospel. But the controlling motive in his ministry was to please God! Sure, there were times when Paul did seek to please men (1 Cor 9:22–23), but only so far as to please God first and foremost. Paul never sought to please men at the expense of the truth

or in conflict with his commission. But what motivated his desire to please God? Two things: 1) God had commissioned him; and 2) God will examine him — his life, ministry, and motives.

None of us today has an apostolic commission like Paul, but every born-again believer has been commissioned as an ambassador for Christ (2 Cor 5:20). And in similar fashion God will also examine the hearts of all believers — our lives, our ministry for Him, and our motives. How will you measure up?

A Desire to Serve (vv. 5–8)

Paul goes on to discuss his actions in Thessalonica. He starts again with three denials. Notice again how each is inconsistent with Paul's ministry:

- He did not come with *flattering speech*. A flatterer seeks to gratify people with the intent to gain something for oneself.
- He did not come with a *pretext for greed*. Paul was not ministering to the Thessalonians as a subtle way of depriving them of material wealth in order to pad his pocketbook.
- He did not come to *seek the praise of men* — whether the Thessalonians or anyone else. His ultimate aim was to win the praise of His Savior!

In verse 5, Paul not only calls on the Thessalonians to bear witness to these things; He also appeals to a higher authority to affirm the truth of his denials. While this most definitely takes the form of an oath (“God is our witness”), we should exercise caution in employing these words to affirm our claims. There are two reasons for this: 1) Christians are warned against the use of oaths (James 5:12); and 2) We do not have the full infallible assurance that our words and motives are completely without error and inspired like the apostles and prophets did (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:19–21).

These three denials are difficult problems that represent a real danger for those in leadership and ministry. It would be wise for us before we speak to pray, “Lord, fill me with the fear of God and remove any vestige of the fear of man, that I might boldly proclaim your word.”

Verse 7 begins with another concessive clause. Although one might expect messengers of Christ to be a financial burden, nevertheless Paul and his team were gentle and caring among them. Verses 7 and 8 give the positive affirmation of their manner of ministry among the

Thessalonians. These things are the outworking of Paul's controlling motive in verse 4: to please God.

While Paul was in Thessalonica, he chose not to receive financial compensation for his work. Part of the reason for this was to be able to refute any charges of greed or covetousness, like those in verse 5. His other motivation for refusing compensation was to allow the gospel to spread without any financial encumbrances on the newly planted church. However, this verse should not be taken as biblical authorization for a church to refuse to pay a vocational minister under the guise of "not wanting to encumber the spread the gospel." The church is commanded to support those who labor in the gospel (1 Cor 9:9–14; 1 Tim 5:17–18). The option to refuse pay rests entirely with the minister himself, not the congregation (1 Cor 9:12, 15, 18).

The contrast in verse 7 is between what Paul could have done and what he did. This also helps to explain his use of the term "apostles" in this verse. Some have suggested that Silas (Silvanus) and Timothy were also apostles. But there are different ways this term is used in Scripture. One is in the technical sense of a person who holds the office of apostle (e.g. Peter, Paul, etc.). Here Paul uses it in the sense of vocational ministers. Timothy and Silas were also vocational ministers and could have asked for financial compensation. But Paul's entire team turned this down to help further the gospel.

Paul uses terms that demonstrate an affection for the Thessalonians: gentle, nursing mother, and deeply caring. These words show Paul's tenderness and patience toward these new believers. When he says "we were pleased to *share/impart*," this is not merely a statement of good intentions, but of actual activity that followed. The "gospel of God" (v. 8) should be understood in the broader sense of Christian doctrine. There were many truths that Paul's team communicated to them beyond the simple truths leading to salvation. In addition, they shared their lives by sacrificially serving alongside the Thessalonian believers.

Conclusion

Biblical ministry is motivated by a desire to please God while seeking to serve others. Our lives can also reflect this kind of godly ministry. If we model our ministries after Paul, we too can see the righteous fruit of converted souls living for the Lord!

~AWB