



THE MOTIVES OF MINISTRY

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 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
 Second Message
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Many believers are unaware of the fact that everyone who professes Christ is actually in the ministry. The vast majority of Christians have never taken vows of poverty, chastity, or obedience, nor have they joined holy orders, yet all who call themselves Christians are called to be ministers.

This raises the question, How can Christians make their ministry more meaningful and effective? Throughout the centuries, the church has turned away from many of the vital principles which made it such a powerful and compelling force in its early years. One principle that has been abandoned is that of the priesthood of every believer. Somewhere along the line there was a gradual transfer of responsibility from individual believers to what became known as the "clergy," a word that is derived from the Latin *clericus*, or priest. As a result, the Biblical concept that every believer is a priest before God was lost, and a special group of "super-Christians" emerged. This group was looked to and depended upon for practically everything that had to do with Christianity, and so came to be termed "the ministry."

When ministry is left to the professionals, however, there is nothing left for individual believers to do except attend church, observe what goes on, and bring others with them. So the Christian faith has become a spectator sport. Someone has even compared it to the game of football: twenty-two men down on a field, desperately in need of rest, and fifty thousand people sitting in seats, desperately in need of exercise.

I repeat: All who call themselves Christians are called to be ministers. Did you know that as a Christian you are endowed with a supernatural spiritual gift to do something that is eternally effective in the lives of others? Our Lord Jesus himself is our example. He was not a clergyman. He was a layman. Preaching was not his profession. He wasn't paid to preach. In fact, preaching wasn't a profession in those days, like it is today. Jesus was a carpenter. He didn't even come from the clerical tribe, the tribe of Levi; he descended from the tribe of Judah. But, in terms of ministry, he set the pace for every Christian who would come later. He described his mission in this way: "I came not to be ministered to, but to minister, and to give my life as a ransom for many."

So Jesus is the Christian model for ministry. A study of his life (and, later, the life of the apostle Paul), reveals two things around which everything else revolved: Jesus and Paul were with people, and they taught them. They befriended others, and they imparted truth. These

were their primary tasks. Effective ministry, therefore, involves growing in those two areas: building relationships, and understanding and communicating the Scriptures.

These are the two areas to which the apostle Paul refers in the second chapter of his first letter to the Thessalonians. Verses 1-8 of this chapter, which we will look at today, deal with Christian relationships; and verses 9-16, which we will study next week, focus on the Christian message.

In chapters two and three of this letter, Paul defends himself and his ministry. The enemies of the gospel in Thessalonica had taken full advantage of his rather unceremonious departure from the city: Following a riot, he had to be smuggled out of town by night. His enemies were anxious to discredit Paul and his apostolic authority, so they launched a smear campaign against them. They tried to upset the faith of the Thessalonian believers by undermining his credibility. "Paul?" they asked. "He ran away. As soon as things got difficult, he took to his heels. He is not interested in you. He is in the ministry only for what he can get out of it, in terms of power, money, and prestige. He isn't sincere. He is an impostor. He ran away, and he hasn't been heard of or seen since." A number of Thessalonian Christians were close to being swept off their feet by these slanderous attacks; thus Paul found it necessary to defend both his ministry and motives. In order to maintain his credibility, and assert his integrity as a minister and an apostle of Jesus Christ, he had to pen these lines.

How then do we minister effectively as Christians? The last thing we want to do is waste our time. As Paul says in chapter 2, "For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, ..." Oh, that that might be said of us! That our time with our spouses produced godly results; that our talks with our children did not descend into arguments; that our conversations with our in-laws had righteous results. Yet, as we know, oftentimes, despite our best efforts, our conversations only make things worse. How can we be more fruitful?

Let us look at what the apostle has to say, as we come this morning to our second study in this letter. Chapter 2, verse 1:

For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the

gospel of God amid much opposition. (1 Thess 2:1-2, NASB)

The reason we fail in ministry is that we have a strong opponent, and that is the evil one. I am convinced that every time we determine to do good, to minister, to serve and be of help, we are going to be opposed, and frequently thwarted. Satan's activity is the best kept secret in the universe. Secrecy is part of his strategy to keep us totally unaware of the spiritual warfare going on behind the scenes.

Let us review what happened to the apostle. Paul went to Philippi with his companions, Silas, Luke, and Timothy, and there they went looking for a synagogue. That was always where they began their ministry, in a synagogue. But they didn't find any. Philippi was a red-neck place, inhabited by Romans who harbored a strong anti-Jewish spirit. There were fewer than ten Jewish men, and just a few Jewish women (they probably were married to Roman soldiers or officials in the city) who gathered down by the river to support and pray for one another. Paul found them there and preached the gospel to them. A wealthy merchant named Lydia opened her heart to Christ. She invited Paul and his friends to her home, and the church flourished.

One day Paul was walking in the marketplace when a young woman, who was a soothsayer, began following him. She was a slave who brought in a great deal of income to her owners. Paul expelled the demon from her, and thus exorcised her owners' source of income. This so upset her masters that they put together a lynch mob and dragged the apostle before the local magistrates. Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison—an illegal act in Paul's case, because the apostle was a Roman citizen.

We are familiar with the rest of the story. Around midnight, Paul and Silas were singing, and their duet brought the house down! There was an earthquake, the prison came crashing to the ground, and the terrified jailer became a believer. In the aftermath, Paul was asked to leave Philippi by the rulers of the city. Further, the Roman officials apologized to the apostle for the beating he had received, and begged him to leave. Paul describes all of this by the words "much opposition." Behind the opposition was the hand of the evil one, who tried to drive him and his companions out of Philippi—and succeeded in driving them out of Thessalonica. Later, Paul says he wanted to come back and minister to them, but Satan hindered them, in that the magistrates refused to let him come back.

That is what Christians discover when they decide to do what is right. When we resolve to get our marriages back on track, things begin to unravel; when we try to talk to our children, we end up in an argument and nothing worthwhile is accomplished. That is when we must remember that we have an enemy—the great opposer.

Paul's boldness to move forward in spite of the opposition came from two sources: purity in his motives (verses 3-6); and gentleness in his manner (verses 7-8). Verse 3:

For [the "for" explains why he was bold, why he didn't capitulate to the enemy] our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts. For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness—nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. (2:3-6)

Here Paul delineates a number of improper motives. Their exhortation, he says, did not come from error, impurity, deception, flattery, greed, and the quest for praise.

First, he says, "We did not come to you in error. We did not distort the truth." He was not like those who preach a prosperity gospel, saying that God wants everyone to be filthy rich. That so-called theology is merely a thinly veiled guise for greed. Nor was Paul's message like that of those who preach what they call freedom—like a certain guru in Oregon a number of years ago whose message of freedom was merely a cover for his licentiousness. Or, to bring the passage a little closer to home, there are those who distort the teaching of a man's headship and leadership in the home to selfishly get their own way—to buy their own toys, to get permission to use their leisure time for themselves rather than minister to their wives. Paul says he did not do that. He did not distort the truth in order to feather his own nest or line his own pockets.

Secondly, there was no impurity. The word literally means "dirt." Paul is saying they were not dirty old men. Possibly his enemies were implying sexual immorality, which was common among traveling teachers. The problem with dirty old men, of course, is that oftentimes they don't look like dirty old men. Their dirt is disguised by what looks like sincere motives.

Nor were they trying to trick the Thessalonians: "For we never came with flattering speech." Flattery is the use of insincere compliments. One scholar defines it as the "tortuous methods by which one man seeks to gain influence over another, generally for selfish ends." It is the insincere use of compliments in order to get something in return, like when someone tells you how great you are, and then slips you his business card.

Next, Paul says they did not come "with a pretext for greed." That is, they did not use ministry as a platform to make money. We must remember that it is not always obvious what one's motives are. I am learning to distrust my own. Recently my wife and I have had some interesting talks about motives, mine in particular, and why I do and say certain things. The prophet

Jeremiah said that “the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?” Only God knows what is in our hearts. I don’t know what my motives are. All I can do is bring them to the Lord and ask him to test them. If they are improper, he will reveal that to me.

The word that Paul uses for being “approved by God” is a familiar one. It is the word *dokimos*, which is the noun form of this word translated “approved.” This is the word that potters in the Middle East inscribed on vases that withstood the heat of the furnace. Vases that cracked were discarded, but those that stood the test had inscribed on the bottom the word *dokimos*. That was the equivalent to our good housekeeping seal of approval, meaning “tested and approved.”

That is the word Paul uses. He says he lays his motives before the Lord and asks him to purify them and test them with a view to approving them. That is his motivation. He wants the God who sees everything to look at his heart. He wants his own motives to be pure, because he wants to please the Lord.

The only way you can do that is by knowing that God loves you very, very much. When you know that someone loves you, you want to please them. There is no secret of Christian ministry more important than this God-centeredness. Whatever our Christian work might be, we are primarily servants of God and no human being. We are not responsible, ultimately, to the church, or our bosses, but to God.

This can be disconcerting, because God sees what no human can see: God sees our motives. But, in another sense, it is tremendously freeing, because God is a more merciful judge than any human being or ecclesiastical court. He is compassionate and kind. He knows our frailty, that we are but dust. Being responsible to him delivers us from the tyranny of human criticism. We always need to listen to criticism, of course. (Some of us need to listen to criticism more openly and honestly than we are presently able.) Nevertheless, having listened, we must look beyond our human critics to the Divine Judge before whom we stand or fall.

So the first critical item in ministry is *pure motives*.

Before we move on to the second principle, I want you to call your attention to something. Notice in the passage Paul’s emphasis with regard to the Thessalonians’ knowledge of what kind of person he was and the kind of ministry he exercised. Regarding his openness:

- v 1 For you yourselves know, brethren...
- v 2 ...as you know...
- v 5 ...as you know...
- v 9 For you recall...
- v 10 You are witnesses, and so is God...
- v 11 just as you know...

Paul draws their attention to the fact that his ministry among them was public. He ministered in the open; he had nothing to hide: “You recall...you know...you were witnesses.” Happy are those Christians who exercise

their ministry in the open, before God and men. They have nothing to conceal, nothing for which they need to be ashamed. They can appeal to both God and men as their witnesses.

The second principle is that we must have *gentleness in our manner*. Not only must we not manipulate people, we must not dominate them. Verse 6:

nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. (2:6-8)

Note the contrasting picture between an apostle’s authority and a mother’s tenderness. Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ. He had the same authority that Jesus had. When he spoke, he did so with the authority of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. Paul was not one to be trifled with. He says he could have commanded them to obey, but he did not. He wasn’t hungry for prestige. He was not seeking honor and glory, making demands on people and throwing his weight around.

Describing his ministry among them, Paul uses a feminine metaphor—that of a mother tenderly caring for her children: “we proved to be gentle among you.” This word that is translated “gentle” is used only two times in the New Testament. The only other usage is in 2 Timothy 2:24, where the apostle urges Timothy not to be quarrelsome: “And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be *kind* to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.”

The point that Paul is making is that Christians need to remember that they are addressing the word of God to people who have been enslaved by Satan. Those who need to hear the word are not the enemy. They never are. They are dupes, victims of the enemy. They need to hear the truth, but they will hear it only if the message is delivered with courtesy and gentleness. Paul says the same thing to fathers. He actually uses the antonym. He says, “Don’t be harsh with your children.” Don’t use a cross tone of voice. This truth stings me personally. Look at how patient a mother is with her children. Paul says that is how we are to be with each other. We may have to say some hard words to people, we may need to be tough, but we must always be gentle.

It is all too easy for me, especially when I am opposed, to assert my authority more strongly and speak louder. I give strong looks, or shake my head, or shame others into obedience. But that is diametrically opposed

to everything Paul is saying here. We are not to motivate others through guilt, but through love. Paul was approachable. He was safe. That is my prayer for my life. I want to be a safe person for others to come to, especially my family. It is going to take a while for God to chip away at my anger and discontent.

The best way to impart values is through warm, loving relationships. Take a moment and think of who has had the greatest effect on your spiritual life and ministry. It is probably not the person who imparted the most truth to you, is it? No. It's the one who loved you, who listened to you and thought well of you. Gentleness, and courtesy of manner. What a wonderful model for Christian ministry! Some of us become heavy handed and autocratic. There are those who seem to believe not in the priesthood of all believers, but in the papacy of all pastors. But Paul's model is that of a mother's gentle manner with her children.

Notice Paul was not only gentle; he was affectionate, too. He describes his feelings toward them as a "fond affection." One scholar defines this word translated affection, "to feel oneself drawn to something." He is referring to a warm inward attachment. Another scholar says it is a term of endearment borrowed from the language of the nursery.

So far from using ministry for personal gain, Paul gave himself to the Thessalonians and for them. He was not thinking of what he could get out of the ministry, but what he could give. There was nothing perfunctory

about his work among the Thessalonians. He loved them and longed to serve them. While I don't know much about a mother's role, I do know that her whole life and routine are determined by the needs of her baby. That is exactly how Paul felt about these newborn Thessalonian Christians.

I want to end this morning by reading a well known prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi. It is probably one of the best statements of ministry ever written:

*Lord make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love
Where there is injury, pardon,
Where there is doubt, faith,
Where there is despair, hope,
Where there is darkness, light,
Where there is sadness, joy.
Oh Divine master, grant That I may not so much seek to
be consoled as to console
To be understood, as to understand,
To be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

That is ministry. And that is to what we are called to as Christians.

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