

# THE GOSPEL: NOT A HUMAN WORD, BUT GOD'S WORD

1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

Key Verse: 2:13

**“And we also thank God continually because when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, 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.”**

Chapters 2 and 3 are about how Paul preached the gospel and lived among the Thessalonians. His life and ministry is a blueprint for gospel workers to follow. The gospel itself has power. But the effectiveness of the gospel is closely related to the lives of gospel workers. Many people have asked Dr. Billy Graham the secret of his fruitful ministry. His response is simple: “Keep your preaching focused on the gospel message and live with integrity.” On the other hand, if a gospel worker loses integrity, their gospel message will be discredited. In today’s passage, we see that the enemies of the gospel knew this very well. They accused Paul of having an impure motive. They planted doubt in the hearts of Thessalonian believers to discredit the gospel message. These kinds of accusations are not unusual. In dealing with them, Paul revealed his integrity as a gospel worker. Gospel workers must live with integrity to advance the gospel. At the same time, those who hear the gospel need spiritual discernment; they need to distinguish between God’s word and human ideas. Spiritual discernment is not a small matter. It is related to our salvation. Let’s learn from Paul how to have spiritual discernment and how to serve gospel work more fruitfully.

**First, Paul’s motive (1-6a).** In verses 1-2 Paul tells how he could dare to preach the gospel. To understand this, it is helpful to review Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica. As Paul and his companions traveled near the region of Asia, they were kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the gospel there. During the night, Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, **“Come over to Macedonia and help us.”** After seeing this vision, Paul got ready at once to go to Macedonia, concluding that God had called him to preach the gospel to them (Ac 16:6-10). This decision changed the course of world history. It led to the evangelization of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christian Europe. Paul first touched Macedonian soil when he arrived in Philippi, which was a leading city. One day, Paul and his companions went outside the city to the river to find a place of prayer. There he found some

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women and preached the gospel to them. When we consider the gaps between them, this is significant. Paul had been an orthodox Jewish Pharisee, while one of the women, Lydia, was a Gentile businesswoman. Paul overcame cultural, religious, gender, and academic differences and shared the good news of the gospel with them. It was like Jesus speaking first to a Samaritan woman to share the gospel (Jn 4:7). God opened Lydia's heart and she accepted the gospel and persuaded Paul to come and stay at her house (Ac 16:11-15). This was the beginning of the Philippian church.

Another day, on the way to the place of prayer, Paul and his companions met a slave girl who was possessed by an evil spirit. Her owners made a great deal of money through her fortune telling. When she irritated Paul, he cured her in the name of Jesus. Then the owners became angry because they lost their hope of making money through her. They stirred up a mob by inciting Roman prejudice against Paul and Silas. Without any trial, they were stripped, beaten with rods, severely flogged, and thrown into prison with their feet fastened in the stocks. It was a terrible and painful humiliation. At that moment, they could have become so discouraged and powerless or angry and bitter. But about midnight, they were praying and singing hymns to God. Wow! Then a miracle happened. All the prison doors flew open and everyone's chains came loose. The jailer felt responsible for a mass prison break and was going to commit suicide. But Paul stopped him, and assured him that no one had escaped. In desperation, the jailer asked, **"Sir, what must I do to be saved?"** Paul said, **"Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household."** In this way one more household was added to the Philippian church. Paul got out of prison and went to Thessalonica. He needed some time to heal and recover physically and mentally. This was Paul's condition upon arrival in Thessalonica.

Paul reminded them of this in verses 1-2: **"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, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition."** The word "dared" means to speak boldly in the face of opposition. This was possible by "the help of...God." Paul's energy and power were gone. But when he depended on God, God became his source of strength and courage, and enabled him to preach the gospel boldly. There was a great work of God. In the span of three weeks, numerous people heard the

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gospel, accepted it, and were completely changed. This is what it means that Paul's visit to them was effective. Where God works so powerfully, there is also a work of Satan. Opposition arose through the jealousy of the Jews. They rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They tried to kill Paul and Silas. In that time of emergency, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to the city of Berea (Ac 17:5-10), and later they went to Corinth. There is a saying, "He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day." Jesus said, "**When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another**" (Mt 10:23a). In this case, running away was not cowardice; it was God's wisdom. But to the enemies of the gospel, this became the basis of accusation. They may have said, "Paul is a coward; that's why he did not return. He is like all other false teachers tramping up and down the Egnatian Way to make money. He doesn't care about you at all." Their purpose was to plant doubt about Paul to discredit his integrity and gospel message. We know that Paul cared very little if he was judged by human beings (1Co 4:3). But out of concern for the Thessalonian believers, he decided to defend himself.

In verses 3-6a, we can find that enemies of the gospel were making false allegations that Paul's motive was impure, his method was trickery, he was masking greed, and he was using flattery to win people's praise. These false accusations were insidious. Those who spread them were wicked and were used by the devil. Anyone who heard these things could be spiritually poisoned and become sick. To defend himself, Paul said in verse 4, "**On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people, but God who tests our hearts.**" The word "approved" comes from the Greek word "dokimazo," which means to regard something as genuine, based on testing. Peter uses the same word when he says that our faith is "refined" by fire, like pure gold (1Pe 1:7). No one knows the deep motive of a person's heart; but God knows. God tests his servants again and again until their motive is purified, and their desire is to please God alone. Paul had been tested and approved by God. So, God entrusted him with preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul said confidently that God was his witness (5, 10).

Here we learn how vital it is to have a pure motive in serving God's people. We need to examine whether our motive is pure or not. Peter the Apostle encourages, "**Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care,**

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watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” (1Pe 5:2-4). To human eyes, those who have a pure motive may look very naïve. But in truth, a pure motive is the most powerful element in a fruitful gospel ministry. There is no substitute for a pure motive. Although we maybe skillful, talented and able, if our motives are not pure, God cannot use us, and our ministry will not last long. So, we need to pray like David, **“Create in me a pure heart, O God...”** (Ps 51:10a).

We also learn the importance of having spiritual discernment toward gospel ministry. When false accusations are flying around through rumors and gossip, it is easy to entertain them and form a negative view of God's servants and his work. The devil's intention is to cut relationships between young believers and their shepherds so they may drift away from salvation. How can we discern? Paul repeatedly said to the Thessalonian believers, **“You know”** (1,2,5,9, 11), and **“you are witnesses”** (10). They knew Paul personally from their experience. He wanted their view of him to be based on this experience, and not on the rumors they were hearing.

**Second, Paul's life (6b-12).** In these verses, Paul reminded the Thessalonians how he had lived and served among them. Especially, he used two metaphors: a nursing mother and a father. Through this we can see his mindset as God's servant. As we think of Apostle Paul, it is easy to imagine him as a strong leader with great authority who never compromised. He was like a debate champion who never loses, or a general commanding his troops. That was one side of him. But he also had another side. He was humble and gentle. Although he had authority as an apostle, he did not use it to lord it over them. Instead of taking a “top down” approach, he humbled himself to meet them on their level in a “bottom up” approach. He cared for the Thessalonian believers like a nursing mother. He accepted them as they were, bore with them, and served them unconditionally without demanding anything. This is easy to talk about. But when we try to serve one person with the mindset of a nursing mother, we find it is not easy at all. Paul served them like a nursing mother? How could he do that? Before knowing Jesus, Paul was the last person to be like a nursing mother. He was harsh and violent, ready to crush opposition. We know that even after being born again, we do not change

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easily. Some people conclude that it is impossible to change one's character. But Paul was changed to be like a nursing mother. It happened as he learned the mind of Christ through much struggle. This transformation does not come naturally; we must struggle intentionally, depending on the Holy Spirit (Php 2:5-8; Gal 5:16). Paul said, **"I die every day,"** and **"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me"** (1Co 15:31; Gal 2:20a). When Paul submitted himself to this Jesus as his Lord moment by moment, Christ changed him into one like a nursing mother. It is not just special people who can be changed. Anyone who submits to Jesus will be changed.

In verse 8 we find that Paul's pure motive was love, like a nursing mother. He said, **"Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well."** Paul shared not only the gospel, but his life as well. When Christ's love compels us, we want to give everything to the loved one. One person I know had Christ's love for a young man with mental problems. To care for him, she thought and prayed day and night to understand his problem and to find the best treatment and resources. In fact, she gave her life to help him. By her help, he passed through the crisis and began to grow in Christ's love. 1 John 3:16 says, **"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters."** Genuine love labors. To become a blessing, not a burden, Paul worked hard night and day to support himself while carrying out gospel ministry (9). As we know, a characteristic of love is that it does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth (1Co 13:6). Love must be sincere, hating what is evil and clinging to what is good (Ro 12:9). Paul's love for the Thessalonians motivated him to live a holy, righteous and blameless life among them (10).

As we see in verses 11-12, not only did Paul express the nurturing tenderness of a mother, he also demonstrated the strength of a father's love by encouraging, comforting and urging the Thessalonians toward godly living. To grow as healthy and mature people, children need both their mother and their father. As he matured in Jesus' love, Paul could fill both roles. Sometimes single mothers may feel sorry that their children do not have a father. But when they grow in Jesus' love, single mothers can raise their children to maturity. Anyone can learn to be both a nursing mother and a

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father-like shepherd when they grow in Jesus' love. Paul's shepherd life is indeed exemplary. It is because he learned the shepherd life of Jesus. Jesus is the good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep (Jn 10:11).

**Third, people's response (13-16).** Though Paul had preached the gospel by the power of God with a pure motive and lived in holy love among the Thessalonians, he knew that he was just a vessel. It was God who worked through him to plant the seed of his word in the hearts of the believers. His confidence was in God, and he was thankful to God. Look at verse 13: **“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, 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.”** When Paul preached the gospel in Thessalonica, there were two responses. Some Jewish people became very jealous and reacted strongly by starting a riot in the city. On the other hand, many God-fearing Gentiles, including prominent women, welcomed the message and turned from idols to the living and true God. In that moment, it was hard to understand how significant these two responses were. But one leads to eternal condemnation, the other to eternal life. What is the difference between the two responses? One views the gospel as a human word, while the other views the gospel as the word of God.

In Noah's time, many people heard the message of God's judgment and salvation. They regarded it as a human word and died in the flood. But when Noah heard the message, holy fear filled his heart and he built an ark to save himself and his family (Heb 11:7). When Jesus was dying on the cross, he prayed, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”** (Lk 23:34a). Two criminals heard this prayer. One of them hurled insults at him: **“Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”** It was because he regarded Jesus' prayer as a human word. But the other criminal said, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”** Then Jesus answered, **“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise”** (Lk 23:39-43). Immediately he went from the cross to paradise because he accepted Jesus' word as God's word (Jn 5:24). Though both heard the same message, their responses were so different and the consequences were greater than they imagined. Here we learn how important it is to view the gospel as God's word. The gospel is not a man-made story, but God's truth. The gospel is the

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power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Ro 1:16). This gospel continues to work in those who believe.

When we receive the gospel as God's word we receive eternal life—along with persecution (Mk 10:30; Jn 15:19). The Thessalonian believers suffered persecution by their own people, just as God's people in Judea had suffered persecution by the Jews. But those who persecuted were heaping up their sins to the limit and would at last receive God's wrath (14-16). Sometimes we hope that there will not be any persecution. However, there is God's purpose in allowing persecution. It helps us to take deep root in the gospel, refines our faith and produces growth. In the early days of Chicago UBF we went through severe persecution. Television and newspaper accounts slandered the ministry of God as a cult. Some people were kidnapped; others were arrested and put in jail. But through this, Chicago UBF members took deep root in the gospel truth and grew. These days, we don't face this kind of persecution. Still, some among us are persecuted by family members or peers. And our brothers and sisters throughout the world are being persecuted in many ways. This is the sign that God is at work through the gospel.

Let us accept the gospel as God's word, and keep preaching the gospel with pure hearts and integrity of life so that God may work mightily in and through us.