

1 Thessalonians 2

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[0 : 00] Amen. We are in 1 Thessalonians chapter 2.

We saw this morning, for those who weren't here this morning, we saw the first chapter of Thessalonians. It was about having confidence in God's mission.

So Paul and Silas and Timothy want the people, the church of the Thessalonians, to have confidence in what God is doing, assured that He is continuing to work among them, continuing to work in the world.

And it's largely an upbeat kind of letter. It's positive. It's encouraging. It's that sort of thing. There's a lot of good news to talk about. In chapter 2, attention really turns to the topic of sincerity.

So how sincere both Paul and the missionaries have been, and then how sincere the response has been. So Paul does want the Thessalonians to be confident about this sincerity, but it's not just confidence that he wants.

[1 : 29] It's the sincerity of that mission and the authenticity, maybe, or the evidence of a kind of true godliness about the mission of God itself that he wants to draw attention to.

It's not entirely clear why Paul wants to draw attention to this. Some people think there might have been accusations going on around the church itself.

Some people there would have been maybe sowing the seeds of distrust and so on. There might have been people from the outside coming in and spreading gossip around and bad news, and so Paul's having to fend off people who are maybe saying he and Timothy and so on aren't being sincere in terms of what they had done among the Thessalonians and so on.

But it's not entirely clear. What is clear is that sincerity is important. Sincerity in terms of how people go about God's mission and spreading it and being on mission and how people receive God's mission.

I once worked with an ordained church minister who eventually disavowed the faith. He said, I don't believe this stuff, and I haven't believed it for some time. I went back to read some of his devotional writings, and my heart truly sank.

[2 : 46] It's a confusing moment if it's ever happened to you or you've seen someone kind of go through that or even heard about it. This kind of disappointment occurs with people both in the right and in the wrong.

I would say that's something that was unfortunate given where that person had served and what he had done. But it happens on all sides in different areas of life.

Sometimes surprising, but it's always disappointing. William Queen is a name that I don't expect you to know. I didn't know it. He conducted the longest and most intensive undercover infiltration of a biker gang in America of all time.

He spent over two years getting on the inside of what was called the Mongols biker gang. And he had to become like them.

He had to become sincere. That's really the name of the game in undercover work. You have to convince the people that you're working with that you're the real deal.

[3 : 50] Of course, it eventually came out that Queen was not the real thing. But the way that they found out was when about 700 federal agents went to all different houses and stormed different locations in a kind of synchronized manner.

And of course, on that day, William Queen was nowhere to be found. He had disappeared to safety. A 250-pound gang member nicknamed Hoss was charged with dealing and stolen motorcycles.

He said this about Queen. Yeah, looking back at it, there were things he did, little things like leaving bars too early, wearing long-sleeved shirts in the summer.

Now seems like giveaways. But at that time, he was just Billy. He rode with us. He partied with us. He was our treasurer. Nobody ever thought twice about him.

There's, of course, huge pressure to prove you're sincere to these groups. And this one particularly, upon the first meeting, Queen was laid out some highly illegal drugs and demanded to do them on the spot to prove that he wasn't an agent or a cop of some sort.

[5 : 02] The entire stress of undercover operations is just that, to appear sincere, not to blow your cover. And once the cover is blown, of course, it's devastating to the criminals. And they shared some thoughts about what they might do if they found Queen on the street.

Now, the Queen was successful. He lived to tell the tale. According to 1 Thessalonians, one's sincerity, one's motivation, the quality of their Christian work is not at all a trivial matter.

No less than 16 of the books, 89 verses. I read 16 verses tonight in chapter 2. There's a little bit more to the chapter. But those 16 are all about sincerity. And the book has 89 verses.

That's just about 18% are explicitly dedicated to this topic. And so we have really two things here. First, we have the sincerity of the mission. The first 12 verses is about the sincerity of Paul and Timothy and their coming to the Thessalonians.

And then, after that, we have the sincerity of the response. To bolster his case for sincerity, Paul goes to great lengths to spell out what the mission was and what it was not.

[6 : 18] You'll notice these two things. He says, this is what we were and this is what we were not. He talks about our coming to you, our appeal to you, and our conduct all through chapter 2.

So let's go through some of the marks of sincerity. The first is in verse 2. Now, what exactly was this conflict?

The word refers to some sort of struggle that was going on. It may be, it probably is the opposition faced by Paul and his companions, even if we don't know the details of that.

Someone resisting them or sowing some sort of seeds of doubt, that kind of thing. But boldness is certainly a mark of sincerity on the part of the missionaries. The second was approval by God.

Have a look at verse 4. Just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. Approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.

[7 : 26] It's eerie how quickly people trust the badge. Continuing on the undercover theme. This is not so much undercover.

This is out of cover, really. A single flash of a golden symbol and a black leather wallet. It gets police officers into homes. It gets federal agents secrets.

It allows people to ask and even do just about whatever they want to do. If you have the badge and a uniform, then you're nearly irrefutable. We all have different relationships with the authorities and with authority in general.

And that's not what I want to talk about. But there's one authority, of course, we ought to esteem in every case. And that is the Lord. Paul, Silas, and Timothy have been approved by God and entrusted with the gospel.

In other words, they have the badge to be missionaries. They have authority to speak for God himself. But what is the badge?

[8 : 33] What is it that really authorizes them? It's easy to kind of say, well, we've been approved by God. Well, so what? Why don't you show me? Can you show me your badge, please? That kind of thing. If we asked them that, what would they say? It's partially evident in the rest of verse 4.

We speak not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. Now, we might not get a completely kind of satisfying answer to this. They might not completely show us everything that we think we need to see.

He says we speak to please God who tests our hearts. And it's really this testing of our hearts that Paul wants to lean on. I'll read at length from one commentator who says this.

Why Paul can express such confidence in his pleasing God turns out to be something that cannot be seen by others and carries more significance for that very reason.

For Paul, this is the ultimate examination because the all-seeing, all-knowing God has put Paul and his companions to the test, as it were, and have done so in the place that counts, their hearts.

[9 : 44] And they therefore have God's approval. God has tested their hearts. He has almost assured the missionaries themselves that they have approval. And Paul, of course, can speak as an authoritative spokesman for God.

He would have a level of assurance that none of us could really ever have, given his place in the history of redemption. And given this boldness and this approval, it's not an arbitrary choice to start with this when he's concerned with sincerity.

It's not arbitrary to start with the theological basis of the mission. Well, what he says altogether will address our need for reassurance in the mission of God. Our deepest concern is or should be what God thinks about the mission.

It's not always just external bits. It's not just the boldness or just his gentleness, as we'll see, and so on. It's really what's underlying that. It's God's approval about the fact.

But that is not all we hear. Paul goes on to say some other things. The God-powered sincerity of the mission is matched by human qualities that are quite evident.

[10:55] Specifically reflected in the teaching of Jesus. Verse 7. He says this. Gentleness and affection.

This word, to be affectionately desirous, is quite a translation, but it's probably getting at the right thing. It means to have a yearning affection for someone.

It's not just general compassion. It's a real kind of longing and desire to have a connection, to pour oneself out. Gentleness and affection are two things, of course, that Jesus prioritizes in his own teaching.

Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Paul says in 2 Corinthians, I, Paul, myself entreat you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ, the gentleness of Christ.

Jesus sees the crowds, as you'll be familiar with, and has great affection for them. He heals their sick. In the parable, it's out of compassion for the indebted servant that the master forgives. He heals the unpayable debt.

[12:19] Gentleness and affection. Those are marks of a sincere Christian mission. Readers of the Bible might also associate difficult labor with true gospel work, and rightly so.

Jesus taught that the laborers of his kingdom ought to multiply what they've been entrusted with. He refers to a son having no place to lay his head, and that similar difficulties are in store for those who follow him.

Paul also says that these are the marks of a sincere Christian mission. So we just carry on. Verse 9. For you remember, brothers, that our labor and toil, we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you while we proclaim the gospel of God.

A sincere mission is toilsome. It's hard work. It is not always easy. Sometimes it might be. And there's one final bit here that Paul adds to it.

I would say a big one, but he just kind of rattles it off in three words. Verse 10. You are witnesses in God also. How holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct towards you, believers.

[13:36] Paul is not content to assert his sincerity. He didn't say this. The mission was sincere. We did it with integrity. We came to you upon God's calling us.

He doesn't say anything that simple. He contends in full detail about the quality of the mission, its divine commission. He talks about its godly quality, its holy character, sacrificial requirements, things that they could see among Paul and Silas and Timothy.

We should be left without a doubt that this mission is God's mission. And there's one last thing here that Paul emphasizes throughout these verses.

And you may have picked up on this now or before in the reading. And that is the knowledge that the Thessalonians have as the marks of sincerity. Verse 1, 2, 5, and 11.

You yourselves know, brothers, that are coming to you is not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know. He talks about we never came in words of flattery, as you know.

[14:40] And as you know how, like a father with his children and so on. I should say that all of these things, most of the things that Paul is talking about, being gentle, affectionate, toilsome, holy, righteous, and blameless.

He's also pairing those, and you can go look at those later. He's pairing those with what they were not. We didn't speak to you words of flattery. We weren't harsh among you. And so on. We didn't demand of you so that we could have a relaxing gospel mission in Thessalonica.

That sort of thing. Why would he refer so many times to what the Thessalonians know? Well, did they know it? And he was just kind of reiterating that fact.

Almost kind of like, remember what you already know. It might have been something like that. But it might have been that they didn't totally connect all of the dots with what they had seen.

And he was trying to reassure them of something, or show them a little something new, based upon what they had already known. It might be a little bit of both of those things. There are two initial takeaways for those on mission.

[15 : 46] And by that, I mean all Christians. We are all on mission of some sort somewhere. The first place, if we are inheritors of the mission to the Thessalonians, we should be assured of the sincerity of our own faith.

And by that, there's some continuity, is what I'm talking about, between the Bible and today. Our story is a part of the Bible's story and the Thessalonians' story.

We are inheritors of that mission of Paul and Silas and Timothy. Because of the faith that we know came through the efforts of those who went before, and forms a part of God's mission, we can be reassured that there is something sincere about what we have received.

Not least of all, of course, in the Scriptures. The second is, if we want reassurance about our own mission, or the efforts of those around us, we should attend to these marks of sincerity. Does it require a lot of hard work?

Have I found evidence of gentleness and affectionate connections with those I'm ministering to? Are they a source of frustration, mainly, and dislike?

[16 : 54] Finally, is there evidence that God approves of this work? And do we have a particular boldness to go about it? Anyplace that those are lacking, they are things to strive for also.

They are marks to be found and marks to nurture in our mission for God. Secondly, there is the sincerity of the response.

Like the sincerity of the missionary's mission, Paul and his companions want to underscore the sincerity of the Thessalonians' response. So he's thinking, We as missionaries certainly came to you with boldness, with God's approval, with gentleness and affection, hardworking and holy. We were sincere. And more importantly, that was evidence of God's work among you. But we're also concerned about your sincerity, says Paul, not just ours. And he deals with the question of the Thessalonian sincerity by means of a similar technique.

What the response was, this is how you responded, and what the response was not. This is what we didn't see. So have a look at verse 13. We also thank God constantly for this.

[18 : 06] That when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it really was, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

Notice the change in emphasis. From gentle and affectionate to how the Thessalonians responded. They received the word of God as God's own speech. They did not receive the word of God as the words of man.

This immediately reflects the sincerity of the mission itself. It is God's mission approved by him, enabled by him, because it was his words that were received. The word here, of course, is not the Bible as we have it, but the message delivered by the missionaries, the word that they brought to the Thessalonians, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us.

It's fascinating here that there's no elaborate explanation for why the Thessalonians received it as God's word. Paul just says that's the way it was. When someone checks the authenticity of a document, they look for links between the document itself and the creator.

Handwriting is verified, the age and location of the materials, the style of the handwriting. Scrutiny is the word that comes to mind. A source is scrutinized if it's to be received as authentic.

[19 : 29] But we're not told that the Thessalonians scrutinized the missionaries' message. Recall chapter 1, verse 5.

Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. Like Paul's confidence in his own conversion because of his encounter with Christ. It's a spiritual work in the heart that brings us to say, ah, that's the word of God, not the word of a human. And that word itself has done a work.

It is the word of God which is at work in you believers. A sincere response to the gospel is one empowered by God himself through the message itself. If the word of God is at work in believers, then what might be at work in someone else?

Paul himself is not soft-spoken about this. If you turned to Ephesians, you don't need to. Ephesians chapter 2, verses 1 and 2, you would see this. You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which

you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.

[20 : 54] Forces of evil are at work and exert themselves upon the world. One interpreter brings it all together.

The word of hearing was delivered to you, but it became something more than the word of hearing. You appropriated it. It sank into your hearts and produced fruits in your practice.

One, the word received into the ears. Two, the word appropriated in the heart. Three, the fructifying and good works. These are the stages which the apostle here expresses. This brings us to the final point, the final evidence of a sincere response to the gospel.

Verse 14 says, For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews. In sincerity, the church imitated and suffered like other churches of God in Christ. They did not act like the Jewish opponents who killed Christ and oppressed the church.

[22 : 01] These are the marks of sincere and insincere responses to the gospel. Everyone's responding in some way. Sincere responses and imitation of those who follow Christ, especially in suffering, versus opposing Christ and oppressing the church.

This question about sincere belief, about authentic response and so on, was one that really energized theologians several hundred years ago.

Today we're very concerned with the mission, sincerity of the mission. That might kind of click for us more. Maybe how sincere an evangelist is and so on. Which Paul is concerned with too, obviously. But some time ago, there were lots of books, famous books, written on the sincerity of belief. If you think around the time of the Great Awakening, where a lot of people are getting converted or supposedly getting converted, everyone's really concerned with what they see and how we can test if this person's really converted to Christianity, if they're a true believer, that kind of thing.

William Wilberforce will be known to you, of course, as a British MP. He was an MP for Yorkshire, actually. I didn't know that. And he played a vital, long-suffering role in the abolition of the slave trade.

[23 : 19] In 1797, he wrote a book, which you can buy under the title, Real Christianity. When it was published, it was, of course, under this title, a practical view of the prevailing religious system of professed Christians in the middle and higher classes of this country, contrasted with real Christianity.

He goes on to say this, Christianity is not a geographical but a moral term. He's laying out what is real Christianity. What is this real response?

It is not the being, a native of a Christian country. It is a condition, a state, the possession of a peculiar nature with the qualities and properties which belong to it.

Further than this, it is a state into which we are not born, but into which we must be translated. A nature which we do not inherit, but into which we are to be created anew.

I still think our Reformed Presbyterian's belief can fit within what he's saying there. He goes on, To the undeserved grace of God which is promised on our use of the appointed means, we must be indebted for the attainment of this nature, and to acquire and make sure of it is that great work of our salvation which we are commanded to work out with fear and trembling.

[24 : 44] Wilberforce brings home the entire chapter of Thessalonians, really, on the matter of sincerity that it's so concerned with.

So then, all said, what's the measure of sincere Christianity? First of all, it's fundamentally a work of God. A sincere response to the gospel, a sincere effort on behalf of God's mission, these things are brought about by God himself.

It's the Holy Spirit at work within you. Even for Christ himself, I do nothing except what the Father gives me. Secondly, it becomes evident in spiritual fruit, especially courage to conduct God's mission, a willingness to toil for it, gentleness, affection for others, especially for Christians, growth in holiness, and the imitation of Christ.

How could sincere Christianity not draw us closer to Christ? Not to look more like Jesus' life than what he himself described.

It is a pattern that's fully indebted to the life of Christ. The point, of course, was not to scare the Thessalonians, but to encourage them along their path. Let me finish with the first verse of chapter 4.

[26 : 09] That's when the letter finally gets to the question of so what. It takes three chapters, and then they go into the so what. Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.

Let us pray.