

A Passion to Please the Lord (Part 1) (1 Thessalonians 2:1-12)

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The longer I try to follow Jesus, the more I realize the great challenge of the Christian life is not knowing what's right. It's *doing* what's right and not giving up when what's right is really hard. Don't get me wrong. There are times following Jesus feels easy. The spiritual wind is at your back. Your heart is awake to the goodness and mercy of the Lord. Faith beats strong. Love and good works abound. Obedience is a joy.

Yet there are many times following Jesus feels hard – really hard – especially when it comes to our relationships with other people. To make a few physical comparisons, doing what you know God wants you to do in a relationship feels like hiking Old Rag in the blazing heat of summer. Swimming upstream in the James after a big rain. Or hitting a headwind on the Belvidere bridge during the Richmond Marathon. You know what you should do or say. Maybe you've even done it before. But nothing inside of you wants to do it again.

You're tired. Really tired. Your resolve to keep going is failing. Your spiritual strength in the relationship is on life support. It was great while it lasted. But the last 3 months, 3 years, or 3 decades have taken their toll. The forces of opposition around you, inside of you, or staring at you across the dinner table seem to grow stronger, not weaker. As Hebrews 10:36 says, "You have need of endurance." Endurance in following Jesus. Endurance in doing what is right in your relationships with other people. Endurance in the work of Christian ministry.

I say as much recognizing not all of you listening to me are Christians. Some of you are wrestling with Christianity. Some of you aren't sure where you stand with Jesus. You don't know if you want to trust and obey him. The hypocrisy you've seen in the church at large and in the lives of professing Christians you've known is troubling. In your mind Christians should quit trying to tell other people what to do in their relationships and give a little attention to their own. Maybe the friend you came with this morning is the first Christian you've know who seems to practice what they preach.

We're going to talk this morning what it means to walk in enduring integrity in our relationships with other people as Christians, especially in situations where doing what's right is hard, not easy. I urge all of my non-Christian friends to listen in. Don't reject Jesus because you perceive hypocrisy in His people. Consider his claims for



yourself. Listen carefully as I talk about how God calls and empowers us to endure in doing what's right, in fulfilling the mission He's given us in our relationships with other people.

If you think following Jesus is hard, consider the Apostle Paul. The suffering and shameful treatment he experienced at Roman city of Philippi in the middle of the 1st century and references in verse 2 was no joke. In Acts 16, Paul and Silas come to Philippi and start telling people about Jesus, the good news of what Jesus did through his life, death, and resurrection to save us from the judgement of God. Before too long, the city magistrates who were supposed to protect Paul as a Roman citizen "tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison..."

No due process. No trial. No justice. The parade of public persecution only continued in Thessalonica. Acts 17:2-7, "On three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.' And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, 'These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.'"

How would all of that affect your desire to keep going? Look at 1 Thessalonians 2:2, "But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God *in the midst of much conflict.*" Say what? What kind of twisted logic produces bold endurance in the work of ministry when following the Lord continues to exact such a tremendous physical, emotional, and psychological toll?

In verses 3-12, Paul gives us the answer, an answer that holds true not only for 1st century apostles experiencing persecution in frontier missions, but for the people of God in every age struggling to endure in the hard work of Christian ministry, in

relating to the people around you as God would have you. Endurance *in* the work of ministry is sustained by a supreme desire to please the Lord *through* our ministry.

There's a critical connection between endurance in ministry and your motivation for ministry. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy knew that it wasn't enough to get busy doing the right things. If we have any hope of persisting in them over the long-haul, especially when it would be easier to quit, we have to do them for the right reason.

1) YOUR MOTIVATION MATTERS

After reminding the Thessalonians in verse 2 of the *reality* of their persistent boldness in ministry Paul and company pivot in verse 3 to explain the *ground* of their endurance. Verse 3, "For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive..." Notice they're saying two really important things here.

FIRST, remember, Thessalonians, we didn't keep urging you to trust and obey Jesus because we were trying to sell you a pack of lies. Our message is true. Our motives are pure. Our methods are honorable. SECOND, recognize, Thessalonians, that the character of our message, motives, and methods is precisely what made us bold and sustained our endurance in doing the work God called us to do in our relationship with you!

What do we tend to focus on? Where do we tend to look to decide whether to keep going or call it quits with a friend, a family member, or our spouse? Two places. First, we focus on how people respond. Do they like what I'm saying to them or not? Second, we focus on whether people have changed. Have the things I've said or done, over and over and over again, produced any visible fruit in their life to date?

Are those bad questions to ask? Not at all. Paul and his co-workers rejoice in 1 Thessalonians 1 over the way the Thessalonians responded to their persistent proclamation of the gospel and the obedience of faith they observed in their lives as a result. But notice when the time came to explain in Chapter 2 WHY they persevered, WHY they endured, WHY they remained bold in doing what God called them to do in Philippi and Thessalonica, they don't say anything about an initial response to their ministry or the visible fruit from their ministry.

They point to the truthfulness of their message, the purity of their motives, and the character of their methods. Are we saying what is true? Yes. Are we saying it for the

right reasons? Yes. Are we saying it in the right way? Yes. If endurance and boldness in Christian ministry is a recipe, those are the ingredients that matter most.

I think it's easy to look at Paul's boldness in ministry in the midst of suffering, and say, "Yeah, but that was the Apostle Paul. He was just one of those unusual guys with a bold personality. He probably loved talking to people, speaking the truth, and saying it like it is and had a really high pain tolerance to boot. I mean, he saw the risen Christ, for crying out loud. And he owed God big-time for persecuting Christians before he became one. So yeah, of course he was bold.

But that's not my personality. That's not my background. That's not my gifting. I tried to do the right thing, I tried to say the right thing, I've done it over and over again for years. I just can't keep going anymore. Better men, better women, probably could. Not me. They don't like what I'm saying. They're not changing because of my example. I quit.

Friend, endurance in Christian ministry isn't a personality thing. It's not a how-are-people-responding thing. Nor is it a visible fruit thing. It's a heart thing. It's sustained by a singular desire, a supreme and ruling desire, to please the Lord. The truthfulness of their message is woven throughout these verses. The primary focus, however, is the purity of their motives in verses 4-6 and the honorable character of their methods in verses 7-12.

Understanding the logic of verse 4 is the key to understanding the whole passage, so look there with me. "But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our heart."

Friends, deep within our hearts lies an insidious desire for the approval and esteem of men. Most of us, if we're honest, want people to like us. We want people to nod their heads affirmingly when we speak up. We want to know whether the opinions that matter most support our actions. We care about the judgements of our friends, colleagues, and family members.

And in one sense, that's not a bad thing. There's wisdom in the admonition of Romans 12:17, "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all." If you're a Christian, you should want the people around you to experience the love and care of God through your words and deeds. You don't want to bring the name of Christ into disrepute by hypocritically saying one thing

The problem is when a good desire to serve people twists into a governing ambition to please them such that you're more concerned about what people think of you than what God thinks of you. Whatever will make her happy, or him like you, or cause that friend to tell her friends how supportive and loving you is what you do. It's not like pleasing God is unimportant. You know it is. You say it is. But if you're honest, what God thinks doesn't take up a fraction of your brain space. Your mind and heart are echo chambers for the voices of men.

If that's the case, friend, if you can tell there is more concern, more anxiety, more thought-time devoted to pleasing men than pleasing God or if you've been at the game so long it feels like pleasing men IS one and the same with pleasing God, you won't endure in the hardship of Christian ministry – in doing what's right in your relationships with other people – NOT because you have a co-dependency problem and need to stop apologizing for yourself, but because you have an idolatry problem and need to repent. You're worshiping people instead of worshiping God.

So how do we know if we're living to please men or God, especially in our relationship with other people? Here's where it helps to look at the **character** of our ministry. In verses 3-4, Paul and company lay out the basic choice – please men or please God. Your motivation matters. Then they double click on each of them in the rest of the passage – verses 5-6 are what pleasing man looks like in action and verses 7-12 are what pleasing God looks like in action. We're going to linger on verses 5-6 for a bit and end by taking a closer look at verse 4. Then next Sunday we'll come back and focus on verses 7-12.

2) PLEASING MAN IS THE PROBLEM

In verses 5-6, Paul and company linger on what speaking to please men, the wrong motivation for Christian ministry, looks like in action. They want the Thessalonians to recognize, "You know what? We saw none of this bad fruit when they were doing ministry among us. That's a good sign they must have been speaking to please the Lord and we should trust and obey what they told us about Jesus as a result!"

If pleasing man is the symptom – what we wrongly fall into doing in the relationships and ministry God has called us to – then these three categories illustrate some of the things we chase - the underlying idols of the heart – that make us want to speak to please men instead of speaking to please the Lord.

A) We speak to please man because we want power

Verse 5, "For we never came with words of flattery; as you know..." What's flattery? Exaggerating what's good about someone or flat out saying they're good when they're really not to increase your influence in their life. A flatterer isn't interested in loving people. A flatterer is interested in using his words to control or influence how people respond to him. What's true is irrelevant. What works is all that matters.

It's really easy to do that in a marriage. "Sure, honey. Whatever you want. Just tell me what you want and I'll do it." Is there a place to lay down your preferences, if you're married, and do whatever would bless your spouse? Absolutely. But there is a form of spouse-pleasing that belies a deeper issue. The real issue is you don't want to rock the boat. You don't want to upset the peace. You know you should confront their behavior. You know you should challenge their decision. You know you should lovingly say some things that are both true and hard.

But you don't. Could your silence be a product of fear? In some cases, yes. But sometimes our silent flattery – saying whatever will make our spouse feel good about themselves, leave us alone, and think we're "amazing," is actually an attempt to control the relationship, to control the level of conflict. Whatever will give you a measure of power over the way your spouse acts or responds is what you do. You don't have to be Napoleon Bonaparte to fall into this trap. It's easy to speak to please men because we want some kind of power over them.

B) We speak to please man because we want wealth

Verse 5, "For we never came...with a pretext for greed – God is witness." It's not hard to find professing Christian ministers on TV who seem more like dishonest salesman – saying whatever it takes to get people to give to their ministry. They say it's all about Jesus, but it's really all about the money. Truth be told, you don't have to be on TV to fall into that trap.

I was talking with a pastor friend recently who told me about a situation where another pastor refused to confront a brother trapped in sin because he was one of the biggest donors to the church. That broke my heart because it proved his wallet was more important to him than the eternal condition of his soul.

There's a reason I don't read through all the end of year giving statements we send out as a church. I want to avoid the slightest temptation to favoritism, speaking to curry favor with the wealthy more than the poor, under the "pretext" of watching out for the church budget. Brothers and sisters, God owns everything. He will

provide for me. He will provide for our church. He will provide for you if you're willing to trust Him.

The temptation to please men because we want wealth isn't unique to the church. The same thing can happen to a Christian in the workplace. Maybe I won't be quite so bold with my boss or with that client as I am with my co-worker or subordinate in talking about Jesus because, you know, they could fire me. Then I wouldn't have a job, I couldn't provide for my family, etc.

True. All those things could happen. But take care, friend, because you don't have to be fantastically wealthy to be consumed with greed. A heart ruled by greed is a heart controlled by the desire for money. Where our love for money is greater than our love for God, we will speak to please men, not God.

C) We speak to please man because we want fame

Verse 6, "Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others..." Of all three, I find this one the most convicting. Allow me to explain why. There is a type of Christian who suffers with a gnawing and very often consuming hunger to know if they are good enough, to know if they are being faithful, to know they are being and doing everything they are supposed to be and do.

The very idea of failure is anathema. Falling short isn't an option. Why not? Because your identity is on the line. Your worth and value – in your eyes at least – are bound up in your performance. Whether or not you are ok is inextricably tied to whether what you are doing is ok. And of course by "ok" I don't mean average. I mean excellent. Practically everything you do is driven by a desire to prove you measure up and then some. In fact, it's hard for you to describe just how deep that hunger goes in your soul. It's like one of those posts on a pier that you trace down into the water on a calm day at sea...20 feet...30 feet...40 feet...and then it disappears. It just keeps going.

So where does a man or woman like that turn to answer the question? Am I good enough? Two options. Your evaluation of yourself, other people's evaluation of you, or a customized cocktail of both. Either way, who are you seeking glory, honor, esteem, and acclaim from? From people, right? Yourself, others, or both. Where that internal dynamic is alive and well, who are we speaking to please? Who are we living to please? We're speaking to please man. We're speaking, working, writing,



confronting, not-confronting, parenting, (you name it!) to “earn” praise from ourselves or praise from other people.

Power, wealth, fame. Every one of those idols will drive us to relate to other people to please them, not God. In fact, left unchecked, actually loving people soon becomes impossible because you can’t genuinely love someone if you’re trying to please them. You can’t help them fall in love with God if you’re preoccupied with making them fall in love with you. Everyone around you simply becomes a means to another end. A pawn in another pursuit. An opportunity to chase or secure what you really want – power, wealth, or fame.

Identifying the problem isn’t hard. Escaping the temptation is. Pleasing man is the problem.

3) PLEASING GOD IS THE GOAL

We’re going to come back next Sunday and look closely at the characteristics of a ministry, a way of relating to other people, that’s compelled by a supreme desire to please the Lord. This morning, however, I want us to conclude by considering two realities in verse 4 that offer tremendous help and hope in the battle.

First, if you’re a Christian, remember that you have been commissioned by God. In any relationship, the God who created you and saved you has entrusted you with a single mission. Help other people follow me by speaking the truth of the gospel and whatever is in keeping with the truth of the gospel. You’re not a rogue agent. You’re not an army of one. You have a commanding officer. You’re a soldier under orders of the King himself.

King Jesus has given you the unspeakable privilege of being his ambassador to the people around you, starting with the people in your home. He’s entrusted you with the good news about Himself, the good news about what Jesus is doing in the world today, including the people in your home. He’s working. He’s calling. He’s inviting. He’s transforming. And if you’re a follower of Christ, you get to be a part of what He’s doing!

The work you’re engaged in, the team you’re fighting for, the gospel ministry you’re doing with your spouse, with your friends, with your children, with your neighbors, isn’t your ministry. It’s good news about Jesus that has been entrusted to you. It’s God’s work. It’s God’s mission. As followers of Christ, we’re enlisted in His cause, not



our own. When you're tempted to speak to please men, remember you've been commissioned by God.

Second, if you're a Christian, remember you are accountable to God. Look at the end of verse 4. "We speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts." I think one of the reasons we're often so dialed into what people think about us and what we need to do to make them happy or give us what we want, is that we want to know we're doing what's right. If you're a Christian, that desire will be present in your heart. You want to please the Savior who laid down His life for you.

The trouble starts when we try to get a read on whether we're doing what's right by adding up all the opinions of the people we care about the most instead of looking to the inerrant and all-sufficient Word of God where the LORD helps us discern whether a particular course of action is right or wrong, wise or unwise. Listen, when you die, Christian, Jesus isn't going to keep you waiting in a heavenly hallway until everyone who knew you best also dies, bring the panel forward, and ask them to evaluate your life.

Why not? Because you are not accountable to them. They didn't create you. They didn't save you. They are not the judge of the universe. God is. Jesus is. You are accountable to Him. He is the one who will test your heart on the final day and is testing your heart even now. So what does David pray in Psalm 139:23-24, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" That's what a Christian does with the desire to know whether what they are doing is right. They pray. We take refuge in the God who tests our hearts. The God to whom we are accountable.

If you're a Christian, remembering we've been commissioned by God pushes us from behind. Remembering we are accountable to God pulls us forward. Together, those two forces are designed to compel us to live to please God, not men. Our motivation for ministry matters, friends. Those who live to please men will not endure when the relationship gets messy or hard. Endurance *in* the work of ministry is only sustained by a supreme desire to please the Lord *through* our ministry.

CONCLUSION



There's final question we need to resolve. "Ok, Matthew, I get it. If I'm going to endure in Christian ministry, following Jesus in my relationships with other people, I have to speak and act to please the Lord, not man. But help me with this. Is it even possible to please the Lord? He's perfect. I'm not. By the grace of God, I'm becoming more like him, but I still have a long way to go. Isn't the whole point of the gospel that we're not good enough? That we can never do enough good things to please the Lord? That even my acts of obedience are riddled with mixed motives and sin? Isn't that why we need Jesus?"

We do need Jesus, friends. But Jesus doesn't make Paul's ambition to speak to please God an exercise in futility. The gospel says that because of our sin, you and I can never earn God's love, acceptance, or approval. So what did Jesus do? He died for us so we could be forgiven. He obeyed for us so we could be righteous in the courtroom of heaven. If your trust for salvation from sin and the death our sin deserves is in Jesus, then God welcomes you for Christ's sake.

So does that make every attempt to please the Lord an exercise in legalism? Not at all! 1 Peter 2:5, having been brought near to the Father once and for all through the work of the Son, we now "offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." What's that mean? It means, Christian, that as the Holy Spirit empowers you to speak to please God, not man, God delights in even your baby steps of obedience! *Not because you're experiential righteousness is perfect, but because it is genuine. It's real. And all that is unholy, unrighteous, and impure in it is forgiven for Jesus' sake.*

The pleasure of God in your obedience, Christian, isn't an act of moral compromise on God's part. Nor is it an act of make-believe as if God never actually delights in what you're doing and only delights in what Christ has done for you. He delights in what Christ has done for you. That's why you're His beloved child in the first place!

But as His child, when you obey, when you speak and act to please Him, He is really and truly and justly pleased with you. Living to please God isn't a race where the finish line is a mirage. You can please God right now. You can please God when you walk out of this room and speak a gentle word of correction and encouragement to a brother or sister in Christ over coffee instead of cowering in a corner, paralyzed by what people think of you.

The gospel doesn't make pleasing God irrelevant. The gospel makes pleasing God possible. That's good news! Endurance *in* the work of ministry is only sustained by a



supreme desire to please the Lord *through* our ministry. Let's pray and ask for God's help.