

1 Thessalonians 2:1-4

Author: Bruce Button

© 2017

www.christianstudylibrary.org

For any questions about this Scripture passage or the notes, please contact us through the Contact Us tab on the website.

Form and structure

The main body of the letter

- After concluding the thanksgiving at the end of chapter 1, chapter 2 begins the main body of the letter.¹
- The main body of the letter extends from 2:1 up to 5:22, and consists of two main sections. The **first main division** (2:1-3:13) narrates Paul's initial contact with the Thessalonians (2:1-12); their initial response to his preaching (2:13-16); his longing for them which resulted in Timothy's mission to encourage them in their faith (2:17-3:10); and a prayer for further contact (3:11-13). The **second main division** (4:1-5:22) comprises various kinds of exhortation, as well as a correction to mistaken beliefs about the coming of the Lord.²
- Although many commentators separate 2:13-16 from 2:1-12, it is probably correct to see these two sections as being closely related. Verses 1-12 deal with Paul's own conduct and ministry during his initial visit, and verses 13-16 deal with the Thessalonians' response to that ministry. The content of verse 13 in particular has a strong connection to verses 1-12: note how the repeated idea of the gospel of God (vv. 2,4,8,9) becomes the focus of the Thessalonians' response to Paul's ministry (v.13).³

Paul's entry into Thessalonica

- The first subsection of the letter body extends from 2:1-12, and narrates Paul's initial entry (εἰσοδος/*eisodos*) into the city. This section has a complex antithetical structure: it consists of a series of statements of the form 'not . . . but'.⁴ For example, in verses 1-2 Paul states: 'For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was **not** in vain. **But** . . . we had boldness in

¹ See the sermon outline on 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 for a discussion of the nature, extent, and structure of the thanksgiving.

² Fee (2009:vi) ends the body of the letter at 5:11, placing the exhortation of 5:12-22 in the letter's conclusion. Finer details like this are not always significant, but it is probably right to accept the judgement of the majority of commentators in dividing the letter body in the way indicated here (e.g. Wanamaker 1990:viii; Green 2002:viii-ix; Weima 2014:56-57).

³ In addition to the thematic connection between 2:1-12 and 2:13-16, there are a number of formal features which indicate that these two passages belong together (see Weima 2014:125-126).

⁴ An antithetical structure is one that places opposing statements next to each other.

our God to declare to you the gospel of God . . . ' (ESV).⁵ Paul uses this antithetical structure to make emphatic statements about the nature of his ministry in Thessalonica.

- Although 2:1-12 forms a unit, it is possible to recognize a number of sub-units in this passage. The main division is between 2:1-4 and 2:5-12, where verses 1-4 provide an overall perspective on Paul's ministry in Thessalonica and verses 5-12 give a detailed description of that ministry.⁶
- Verses 1-4 can then be further divided into two subsections: verses 1-2, which make a general assertion about the nature of Paul's entry, and verses 3-4, which motivate the statement in the first two verses.⁷
- Recognizing the antithetical structure of verses 1-12, we can outline the passage like this:⁸
 - I. An overview of Paul's initial ministry in Thessalonica (2:1-4)
 - A. The nature of Paul's entry into Thessalonica (2:1-2)
 1. The visit was **not** deceptive⁹ (2:1)
 2. **(But)** Despite opposition, God's gospel was proclaimed (2:2)
 - B. Motivation for the claim in vv.1-2 (2:3-4)
 1. Paul's proclamation was **not** characterized by error, impurity, or deceit (2:3)
 2. **(But)** Paul spoke as one seeking to please God (2:4)
 - II. A detailed description of the ministry (2:5-12)

Exposition

The purpose of 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

- In the understanding of many — perhaps most — commentators, Paul's purpose in writing this passage is either to defend himself from accusations that were being made against him in Thessalonica,¹⁰ or to support his aim of exhorting the Thessalonian believers to live as obedient disciples of the Lord Jesus.¹¹
- The reasons given for interpreting this passage as a defence against accusations made against Paul have largely to do with the way in which the apostle seems to be so anxious to correct false ideas about his ministry in Thessalonica. Note: (a) the repeated use of 'not . . . but'; (b) the repeated appeal to what the Thessalonians already know (vv.1,2,9,10); and (c) the repeated appeals to God as witness of Paul's character and motives (vv.4,5,10).¹²
- Those who reject the interpretation of this passage as a defence against accusations point to a number of ancient writers who used an antithetical style with the aim of exhorting their

⁵ The ESV brings out the underlying structure of the Greek text more clearly than the NIV.

⁶ See Van Rensburg (1986) for an explanation of this way of dividing the text.

⁷ See Van Rensburg (1986).

⁸ The structure is much clearer in the Greek text than in most English translations. In the Greek text the use of **not** (οὐ/οὐ) . . . **but** (ἀλλὰ/alla) shows clearly what the contrasting (antithetical) statements are.

⁹ See under Exposition for the reasons why the word 'deceptive' is used here.

¹⁰ See, e.g. Fee (2009:53), and especially Weima (1997; 2014:121-125).

¹¹ See, e.g. Wanamaker (1990:91), and especially Malherbe (2008:153-156).

¹² Weima (2014:123-124).

readers regarding correct attitudes and behaviour. They also note that such writers often set themselves forth as an example for their readers, as Paul does here (esp. vv.10-12).¹³

- There may be an element of truth in both these views regarding the purpose of 2:1-12, but we can probably get a clearer idea of Paul's aim in this passage by looking at the wider context, especially 2:1-3:13.¹⁴ From this context we note that Paul, both before and after sending Timothy to Thessalonica, was deeply concerned about the Thessalonians' *faith*: would they continue to trust and follow Jesus as Lord, or would they abandon their newfound faith in him (3:1-5,6,10)? It would be consistent with this concern if 2:1-12 is understood as an attempt to strengthen the faith of the Thessalonian believers.
- This understanding of 2:1-12 is supported by 2:13, which can be viewed as a conclusion to what is said in the first twelve verses of the chapter: *because of what he has written in 2:1-12*,¹⁵ Paul thanks God that the Thessalonians accepted his message not as the word of men, but as the word of God. In other words, all that is written in 2:1-12 encourages the Thessalonians to continue believing that the gospel of Jesus Christ, for which they are suffering, is not a story that Paul made up to get money, respect, or popularity from them; it is the very word of God which continues to work powerfully in their lives. They must not think that they have believed in vain!
- This perspective will guide the exposition below.

Verses 1-2: ¹ You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. ² We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.'

Overview

- Note the structure of this passage (see above under Form and structure). In verse 1, Paul makes a negative assertion ('our visit was **not** a failure'), and in verse 2 he makes the corresponding positive assertion, introduced in Greek by 'but' (ἀλλά/*alla*) ('[**but**] . . . with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel . . .'). This is important for understanding the meaning of the passage.

Verse 1: 'You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure.'

- In Greek, the statement **you know** is emphatic: 'you *yourselves* know'. Paul is reminding the Thessalonian believers that they are already aware of what he is about to tell them; they have no reason to doubt these matters. If, due to persecution or inner uncertainty, they do begin to doubt, they must think calmly about the facts of which they are already aware.
- The word 'visit' in **our visit** translates the Greek word εἴσοδος/*eisodos*, which generally means 'entrance'. Paul used this word as a 'quasi-technical term . . . [which] refers not only to his actual coming, but also to his professional conduct as a gospel messenger who lives amongst those who accepted his message as the λόγος [*logos*] of God.'¹⁶ Paul is about to describe his ethos and conduct during his founding visit to Thessalonica. This description will help to assure

¹³ Wanamaker (1990:90); Malherbe (1983; 2008:153-156).

¹⁴ Winter (1993:70).

¹⁵ V.13 begins with the phrase 'And because of this' (Καὶ διὰ τοῦτο/*Kai dia touto*), a phrase which usually refers to what has just been said/written.

¹⁶ Winter (1993:67).

the Thessalonian believers that they have indeed put their trust in divine realities, rather than in mere human claims and false promises.

- The Greek word which is translated ‘failure’ in the phrase **not a failure** is the word *κενός/kenos*. This word frequently has the meaning ‘empty’, and when used figuratively can mean either ‘hollow, without substance’ or ‘futile, in vain’.¹⁷ The NIV, along with virtually every other English translation, has chosen the latter meaning, but the indications are strong that this is not correct. The key to finding the meaning of the word lies in the antithetical structure of the passage. Paul states, ‘Our entrance among you was **not** *κενός/kenos*, **but** though we had previously suffered, etc.’ This structure indicates that what comes after the ‘but’ is opposed to what comes after the ‘not’. Therefore, to find the meaning of *κενός/kenos* in verse 1, we need to consider the positive and negative statements in the following verses.¹⁸
- In verse 2, Paul states that he was bold ‘in God’ to tell the Thessalonians the ‘gospel of God’. In verses 3-4, Paul states that his message was **not** characterized by error, impurity, or trickery, **but** was spoken with an awareness that it was entrusted to him by God. This line of reasoning comes to a climax in verse 13, where Paul states that the Thessalonians received his message **not** as the word of man, **but** as it truly is, the word of God.
- Although the idea of Paul’s visit not being ‘a failure’ or ‘in vain’ (ESV) does have a connection with 1:8-10,¹⁹ it makes little sense in the framework of the antithetical statements in chapter 2: how is the idea of a visit being a failure opposed to the idea of boldly preaching the gospel of God? On the other hand, the idea of Paul’s visit not being ‘hollow’ — i.e. not being without substance — fits perfectly in the context. The danger to the Thessalonians’ faith was for them to think that the message Paul preached, although it spoke about God and his salvation, was nothing but a humanly-invented message designed to gain wealth, status or popularity for Paul and his fellow missionaries. Such a message could well be described by the word *κενός/kenos* in the sense of ‘hollow’ or ‘deceptive’: it promised something on the outside, but inside it was empty, devoid of substance, hollow.²⁰

Verse 2: ‘We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.’

- It is helpful to have the ESV translation of this verse before us as well, since it helps to bring out the antithetical structure of the passage:

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.

¹⁷ Arndt, Danker & Bauer (2000 s.v. *κενός*). Examples of the sense ‘hollow, without substance’ can be found in 1 Cor 15:14; Eph 5:6; Col 2:8; examples of the sense ‘futile, in vain’ can be found in 1 Cor 15:10,58; 2 Cor 6:1; Gal 2:2; Phil 2:16.

¹⁸ Cf. Green (2002:115).

¹⁹ Wanamaker (1990:92) argues for the meaning ‘in vain’ on the basis of the parallel with 1:9-10.

²⁰ Fee (2009:57) argues for the meaning ‘in vain’ on the basis of parallels with other passages in Paul’s letters and with Is 65:23; however, as indicated here, this meaning does not fit the context, especially the antithetical structure of the passage. Weima (2014:130-131) understands *κενός/kenos* in this passage to mean ‘sincere’; this is similar to the interpretation given here, although Weima’s emphasis is on Paul’s character rather than on the character of the message itself. In this context sincerity alone is not sufficient; Paul could have been sincere but wrong, and the Thessalonians would still have believed a deceptive message.

- Paul's aim in this passage (2:1-13) is to assure the Thessalonian Christians that they had not put their trust in a hollow, human message, but in a message that came from God himself. Having denied in verse 1 that his message was hollow, he now asserts, positively, that it was from God.
- The word translated **previously suffered** (προπαθόντες/*propathontes*) refers to suffering in general, while the word translated **insulted** (ὕβρισθέντες/*hubrithentes*) combines the ideas of maltreatment and insult.²¹ Acts 16:19-40 provides a clear picture of what had happened in **Philippi**, where Paul and Silas were beaten publicly and thrown into prison, even though they had not legally been found guilty of the accusations made against them. Such treatment would have caused offence to anyone, but was doubly offensive in this case because Roman law did not allow Roman citizens to be treated this way, and Paul and Silas were Roman citizens (Ac 16:37).
- With the words **as you know**, Paul again reminds the Thessalonians that he is not telling them anything that they did not already know.
- Although Paul and Silas had suffered such painful and shameful treatment in Philippi, this did not deter them from preaching the gospel again at Thessalonica, their next main stop (Ac 17:1). And they did not preach apologetically or timidly, but with 'boldness' (ESV) they **dared** to do so. Such boldness was only possible **with the help of our God**. In this way, Paul draws attention to the divine origin of his message. After all, if he had known that he was preaching a hollow, empty message (i.e. a message of mere human origin), he would not have been inclined to endure suffering and shame for it. Furthermore, if the message was not from God, God would not have given him the strength to keep on preaching despite the opposition.
- The divine origin of the message is further emphasized in the way Paul refers to it as **his** (i.e. God's) **gospel**.
- The NIV's **in spite of strong opposition** interprets the Greek phrase ἐν πολλῷ ἀγῶνι/*en pollō agōni* in the sense of external conflict. Literally, the phrase means 'in a great struggle', and could also refer to intense effort or to inward conflict and anxiety. However, the NIV's interpretation is supported by the wider context of the passage (note 2:14-15; 3:3-4) and by the evidence of Acts regarding the opposition Paul faced while preaching in Thessalonica (Ac 17:5-9). The reality of such opposition further highlights the divine strength given to Paul as he preached the gospel in Thessalonica.²²

Verses 3-4: ³ **For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you.** ⁴ **On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.'**

- These two verses begin with **for**, indicating that they further explain and substantiate verses 1-2. Note that they too have an antithetical structure — in fact, a double antithetical structure, where the second (positive) element has within it another antithetical construction:

³ For the appeal we make

negatively: does **not** spring from error or impure motives, **nor** are we trying to trick you.

²¹ See Arndt *et al.* (2000 s.v. ὑβρίζω); Louw & Nida (1996 § 88.130).

²² Wanamaker (1990:93).

positively: ⁴ **On the contrary**, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.

negatively: We are **not** trying to please men

positively: **but** God, who tests our hearts.

- This antithetical structure is emphasized by a triple negative in the Greek of verse 3: ‘**Not** from error, **not** from impurity, **not** in trickery’.

Verse 3: ‘For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you.’

- Paul’s preaching was not a disinterested presentation of facts, but included an **appeal** (παράκλησις/*paraklēsis*) to his hearers to respond to the divine realities of the gospel. This word has the sense of urging the hearers, of pleading earnestly with them, to respond to the message.²³
- With three denials Paul now emphasizes what his message was not. (If Paul’s preaching had been characterized by the three qualities mentioned here, it would have qualified as hollow or empty — v.1.)
- Paul’s first denial is that his preaching did not **spring from error** (πλάνη/*planē*).²⁴ The Greek word could refer either to possible misunderstanding on Paul’s part (i.e. a genuine error), or to deceptiveness (in the sense of a deliberate attempt to lead people astray). However, the third denial deals with deceptiveness, so it is likely that Paul, rather than repeating himself, is addressing a different problem with this first denial: he is asserting that he himself was not deceived about the message that he presented.²⁵ A little thought will show that it was important for the Thessalonians’ faith for them to be assured that Paul, however sincere he might have been, was not himself deceived.
- The second denial concerns **impure motives**, or simply impurity (ἀκαθαρσία/*akatharsia*). Although some commentators interpret this word as a reference to sexual impurity, there is no indication in Paul’s letters that he was ever charged with such behaviour. Rather, the context indicates a more general kind of impurity including possible greed and other selfish motives (cf. vv.5-6).²⁶
- Thirdly, Paul denies that he was **trying to trick** the Thessalonians into responding to the gospel. The word used here (δόλος/*dolos*) refers to the use of falsehood and deception in order to lure someone into a particular belief or course of action.²⁷ A prime example of such deceit would be the flattery mentioned in verse 5.
- The kind of motives and behaviour which Paul denies in these verses was well known among the travelling philosophers and orators of Paul’s day. Such people would enter a city hoping to gain a reputation as powerful speakers. In addition to winning prestige, they could create an

²³ Arndt *et al.* (2000 s.v. παράκλησις); Louw & Nida (1996 § 33.169); Wanamaker (1990:94).

²⁴ The Greek states that Paul’s appeal was not ‘out of’ (ἐκ/*ek*) error. This is correctly and idiomatically translated by the NIV as ‘spring from’ (i.e. it did not have its origin in error). This preposition is used also in the second denial, but not the third, which uses ἐν/*en* (‘in’). The idea is that the first two denials concern the source of the message whereas the third concerns the manner in which it was presented.

²⁵ Wanamaker (1990:94) *contra* Weima (2014:134-135).

²⁶ Wanamaker (1990:95); Fee (2009:60); Weima (2014:135).

²⁷ Arndt *et al.* (2000 s.v. δόλος); Louw & Nida (1996 § 88.154); Weima (2014:135-136).

income for themselves as teachers of elite young men, or as orators who would represent citizens in their court cases (cf. the role of Tertullus in Ac 24:2-8).²⁸ It may well be that the persecutors of the believers in Thessalonica were accusing Paul of such an approach, and thus challenging the faith of the new Christians. In any event, Paul wanted to distinguish himself from these orators and their methods.²⁹

Verse 4a: 'On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.'

- **On the contrary** correctly represents the conjunction *ἀλλά/alla*, which indicates a strong contrast and introduces the positive element of the antithetical construction of verses 3-4. Paul reassures the Thessalonians that, rather than being motivated by error or impure desires, rather than preaching a deceptive message, his gospel really did come from God. Paul is not so much defending himself (though such defence may not be completely absent)³⁰ or seeking to establish his authority³¹ as he is encouraging the Thessalonians' faith (cf. 2:13; 3:2,5,6,10).
- The statement **we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel** expresses a correlation between being approved by God and what is spoken. More literally, we would write (cf. ESV):

Just as

we have been tested and approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel

so

we speak.

- The Greek word translated **approved** (*δοκιμάζω/dokimazō*) indicates approval on the basis of testing³² — such as may be used to test the genuineness of a metal or precious stone. Although Paul does not indicate here the nature of the testing, his statements in chapter 1 certainly indicate that God was at work through him in the preaching of the gospel; the implication is that God has approved him and **entrusted** him **with the gospel**.
- Furthermore, Paul (and this holds for his coworkers as well) had spoken (**we speak as**) in a manner that was consistent with a deep consciousness of God's ownership of the gospel and of his dependence on God. This is elaborated on in verse 4b.
- Underlying Paul's thinking here is the idea that the gospel is not merely a set of propositions which can be presented or discussed in an objective and disinterested way by just anyone; rather, the gospel belongs to God and he himself is active when it is faithfully proclaimed. Paul's letters show that he had a profound awareness of the trust that had been given to him and of the presence, power and grace of God in his ministry (Rm 15:15-19; 1 Cor 15:10; 2 Cor 3:3; 5:18-20; Gal 2:7-8; 1 Th 1:4-5). That presence and power made the ministry both genuine and effective, and were given by God out of his grace. Paul was consumed by the desire to experience God at work through him, and this is what he is seeking to communicate to the Thessalonians at this point.

²⁸ Winter (1993:59-60).

²⁹ Bruce (1982:26).

³⁰ Fee (2009:61); Weima (2014:136-137).

³¹ Wanamaker (1990:96).

³² Arndt *et al.* (2000 s.v. *δοκιμάζω*).

Verse 4b: 'We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.'

- In the Greek original, the phrase 'we speak as' ('so we speak' in ESV) comes at the end of verse 4a, making it clear that verse 4b is an explanation of what it means to speak as those who have been tested and approved to be entrusted with the gospel. In short, it means to recognize that preaching the gospel is not a mere human activity in which some human beings try to persuade others regarding certain beliefs or patterns of life. It means recognizing that the gospel is God's (vv.2,8,9,13), and that no gospel proclamation is worth anything if God is not present and active in it. Thus it was important to please God, not men. This was the understanding which underpinned and empowered Paul's entrance (εἴσοδος/*eisodos*; v.1) into Thessalonica.
- Verse 4b is another antithetically-structured statement. Paul denies that he took the approach of **trying to please men**. Such an approach might have been expected, given the widespread practice of the travelling philosophers of the Graeco-Roman world, but would have contradicted the nature of the gospel. Paul firmly resisted this approach and sought not to please men **but God**.
- The seriousness with which Paul took the need to speak as one desiring to please God is revealed by the words **who tests our hearts**. The present tense of the Greek verb (δοκιμάζω/*dokimazō* — the same verb used in v.4a) indicates that Paul thought in terms of a testing which was not confined to the past (say, to the time of his visit to Thessalonica), but continued in the present as well. He understood that, however easily he might be able to make a good impression on other people by his words and his outward behaviour, God could see his heart. He was at pains, therefore, to maintain truth in the inward parts, and especially towards God.

Application

It is essential for people to be convinced that the message which they hear is a message which truly does come from God.

- One of the dangers which threatened the faith of the Thessalonian Christians was the idea that Paul's preaching was motivated by error or greed, and that it was, in fact, deceptive or 'hollow'. If they had started to think that they had put their faith in a message whose only purpose was to win popularity, prestige, or money for Paul, Timothy, and Silas, it would have been difficult for them to keep on following the Lord Jesus in the face of severe persecution. Paul's response was to affirm that he had preached the gospel *of God*, and that, throughout his ministry in Thessalonica, he had sought to please God. The Thessalonians need not fear that they had believed a mere human message.
- We face similar dangers in our own day. The secular philosophy of the Western world — which is fast spreading across the globe — wants us to believe that religion is a private matter of personal choice and preference; it has nothing to do with truth or with facts that can be verified or disproved. This leads to the widespread, politically-correct idea that all religions are equal and that nobody — least of all Christians — has any right to claim that their religion is better than any other. Religion is fine as long as it 'works for you', but you shouldn't try to claim that it has anything to do with objective truth. Even professing Christians fall into the trap of thinking of their faith as something which falls more into the realm of feeling than of truth.

Nancy Pearcey, a Christian apologist, tells of a Chemistry student who became a Christian; this student explained her faith like this: ‘ “I operated on the assumption that what I learned in science was really true, . . . while church was a kind of support group that provides a nice story to help you cope with reality.” ’³³

- We need to resist this view of the gospel. It is not some sort of man-made message, but the very truth of God. As Nancy Pearcey states:

The key to the power of the biblical message is the conviction that it is actually true — objectively, universally, cosmically true. It is not merely a psychological coping mechanism. It is not a sociological product of Western culture. It is truth about the universe itself.³⁴
- Another popular view is that Christianity is a ‘white man’s religion’, and has no place in Africa; for Africans to embrace Christianity is to abandon their culture and adopt the religion of the oppressor. We must acknowledge that much evil has indeed been done in the name of Christianity, and that Christianity has indeed been used to justify the oppression of non-European peoples. Yet, such practices have no basis in Scripture and are *misrepresentations* of the gospel, the Bible, and Christianity. As much as the anti-colonial political climate is often used to portray Christianity as foreign and Western, it is crucial for us to insist that the gospel comes from the One who created us all, and that it brings liberation for people from every tribe, language, people and nation.
- In this regard it is helpful to remember that Christianity did not originate in Europe. It originated in the middle-east, when most of Europe was still uncivilized. Some of the fiercest opponents of the New Testament church belonged to the Graeco-Roman culture, the forerunner of later European civilization (this is clear from 1 Thessalonians itself). Furthermore, the church’s early expansion was strong in North Africa, and a number of Africans were among the leaders of Christianity in its first few centuries. Such leaders included Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, and Lactantius, as well as Augustine, one of the greatest theologians of all time.³⁵

One of the most important aspects of a preacher’s integrity is to deliver his message with the aim of pleasing God, depending on him to make the message effective.

- Paul had a profound conviction that God was at work in the preaching of the gospel, and this was the conviction which motivated him to seek God’s approval alone. Notice how he expresses this conviction in the following passages (emphasis added):

Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what *Christ has accomplished through me* in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done (Rm 15:17-18).

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but *God made it grow*. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only *God, who makes things grow* (1 Cor 3:5-7).

³³ Pearcey (2010:29).

³⁴ Pearcey (2010:36).

³⁵ Chadwick (1986:6); Hollingworth (2013:51).

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet *not I, but the grace of God that was with me* (1 Cor 15:10).

On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For *God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles* (Gal 2:7-8)

- This same conviction is expressed by John Calvin in the following words:

But our chief consolation is that this [i.e. the work of the gospel] is the cause of God and that he will take it in hand to bring it to a happy issue. Even though all the princes of the earth were to unite for the maintenance of our Gospel, still we must not make that the foundation of our hope. So, likewise, whatever resistance we see today offered by almost all the world to the progress of the truth, we must not doubt that our Lord will come at last to break through all the undertakings of men and make a passage for his word. Let us hope boldly, then, more than we can understand; he will still surpass our opinion and our hope.³⁶

- If this is true, if indeed the only hope for the gospel's effectiveness lies in the work of God as he owns and blesses the preaching, then the preacher's first priority is to be pleasing to God. This has both negative and positive implications.
- Negatively, the preacher must not think that his hearers can be won over by clever arguments or by making the message appealing to the audience. Though a preacher should use his best, God-given logic, it is not the logic that will change people's hearts. Though he will seek to show how the gospel message brings wholeness and happiness, he must not try to appeal to materialistic and selfish desires.
- This is one of the major problems of the prosperity gospel that is so popular in our day. Preachers are at pains to show people how Christianity can make them rich, or guarantee their healing from any and every disease. How does this match up to Paul's statement that '[w]e are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts' (1 Th 2:4)?
- Positively, seeking to please God has a number of implications, of which I will draw attention to three: being faithful to the message of Scripture; living with integrity before the face of God; and committing the ministry to God in prayer.
- If one is to seek God's approval in the preaching of the gospel, there is absolutely no alternative to the hard work of ensuring that one's message is true to Scripture. Paul stated that his message did not 'spring from error' (1 Th 2:3). He was confident enough of his message that he could claim not to be mistaken — not even sincerely mistaken. Of course, we are not apostles as Paul was, and we must be humble enough to acknowledge that we are fallible. But this is no excuse for being lazy in regard to the Scriptures. Today's preacher — as is the case for preachers in every age — must heed Paul's words to Timothy: 'Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth' (2 Tim 2:15). Or, as Richard Baxter reminds us, 'He must not be himself a babe in knowledge, that will teach men all those mysterious things

³⁶ Murray (1971:xii); see also sermon outline on 1 Th 1:2-3.

which must be known in order to salvation.³⁷ There is no shortcut in this task. It takes training, reading, thinking, praying. May God give us preachers who are willing to do that!

- In seeking God's approval, we must also live with integrity before God. Paul recognized that God is the one who 'tests our hearts' (1 Th 2:4). We may cover up our thoughts and even our actions to prevent other people seeing what we think and do; but God sees and he cares. This is powerfully expressed by the psalmist:

O LORD, you have searched me
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O LORD (Ps 139:1-4).

- It is relatively easy to become 'professional' in our approach to ministry. This would have been one of the temptations Paul faced, with the travelling philosophers and orators being so well-known and highly regarded in the ancient world. In our day we can easily impress people with a crowded diary, a smart office, church staff, the names of famous Christian leaders on our lips — the list goes on — and they can be very impressed. But we need to ask what God thinks when he looks into our minds, our hearts, and our private actions. Does he find envy, pride, a subtle twisting of the truth to make ourselves look good, jealousy, anger, lust, materialism, prayerlessness, impurity? Things which we can hide from people but not from God? We need constantly to ask ourselves: who is able to make the gospel effective in turning sinners from darkness to light, and in transforming the saints into the image of Christ — the people we are so eager to please, or God who sent his Son into this world, God who poured out the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost?
- While many ministers are occupied with methods that will (they hope) make their churches grow, the importance of prayer is often forgotten. There can be no greater call to prayer than the example of the Lord Jesus himself. Here is a small sample from the gospels:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed (Mk 1:35).

But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (Lk 5:16).

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles (Lk 6:12-13).

- The centrality of prayer to our character before God is powerfully expressed in the statement, 'What a man is on his knees before God, that he is, and nothing more.'³⁸ There can surely be no greater way to express our dependence on God, and our desire to please God than a commitment to prayer.

³⁷ Baxter (1862:68). The quote in the text can be paraphrased like this: 'One who intends to teach others the deep mysteries of God which are necessary for salvation, must not himself be a babe in knowledge.'

³⁸ Attributed to Robert Murray McCheyne.

- While Paul's focus — and hence the focus of this point of application — is on preachers of the gospel, it is worth stating that all of God's children should live and walk in dependence on God and a desire to please him. This is especially important as each one of us is called to share the good news of Jesus Christ with those around us, as we are also called to encourage one another in the gospel.

Further points of application

- It is worth mentioning some further points of application which could be valuable and important in different contexts. They will not be developed here, but preachers are encouraged to develop them, if necessary, according to the model given above.
 - We are not to use the gospel as a means for achieving our own ends, as if it were some commodity that we can hawk or peddle.
 - God supplies strength to keep on preaching His word despite strong opposition.
 - Hearers of the gospel should judge preachers on the basis of their faithfulness to God as stewards of His gospel, not on the outward attractiveness of their message.

Sermon suggestions

Theme:

- **Exegetical** theme:

Topic: Paul's burden in encouraging the Thessalonians' faith

Theme: Paul's burden in encouraging the Thessalonians' faith was to convince them that his message truly did come from God.

- Possible **homiletical** theme:

We ought to be assured that our faith comes from God himself, and to live according to this conviction.

Suggested sermon outline

- I Introduction
- II Paul was concerned to assure the Thessalonians that the gospel which they had believed truly did come from God.
 - A Paul's was deeply concerned for the Thessalonians' faith.
 - B Paul denied that his message was deceptive, or that he had come to them with ulterior motives or deceptive methods.
 - C Paul assured the Thessalonians that he had come to them as one with God's own commission.
- III In our own day, we must stand firm on the assurance that the gospel truly does come from God.
 - A We must resist all the attempts of our society to relativize the gospel, as if it were merely an opinion, or a culture-bound idea.

B We — especially (but not only) ministers of the word — must seek God’s approval rather than human approval as we communicate the message to others.

IV Conclusion

Comments

- The intention of point II A in the outline above is to explain the context of chapters 2 and 3. This will help the congregation to feel the force of the main assertion — the assertion that Paul was seeking to assure the Thessalonians that their faith came from God. (Take note of the Exposition section above.)
- For part II of the outline, make sure that you as a preacher understand the exegesis given in the Exposition section above. Consult other commentaries where possible. Don’t try to share all the technical details and debates with your congregation, but help them to understand the logic of the text. Help them to feel the force of Paul’s exhortation and make it come alive for them!
- There will not be time to cover all the details of application given in the Application section above. Consider all the applications that are discussed in detail, the suggested ones, and others that you may think of, and then decide which are most pertinent for your context and congregation. Develop part III of your outline accordingly.

Bibliography

- Arndt, W., Danker, F.W. & Bauer, W., 2000, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*, 3rd edn., University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Baxter, R., 1862, *The reformed pastor*, 5th abridged edn., Banner of Truth, Edinburgh.
- Bruce, F.F., 1982, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Books, Waco, Tex. (Word Biblical Commentary.)
- Chadwick, H., 1986, *Augustine*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Fee, G.D., 2009, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich. (New International Commentary on the New Testament.)
- Green, G.L., 2002, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich. (Pillar New Testament Commentary.)
- Hollingworth, M., 2013, *Saint Augustine of Hippo: an intellectual biography*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Louw, J.P. & Nida, E.A. (eds.), 1996, *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament based on semantic domains*, United Bible Societies, New York.
- Malherbe, A.J., 1983, 'Exhortation in First Thessalonians', *Novum Testamentum* 25(3), 238-256.
- Malherbe, A.J., 2008, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A new translation with introduction and commentary*, Yale University Press, New Haven. (Anchor Yale Bible.)
- Murray, I.H., 1971, *The Puritan hope: A study in revival and the interpretation of prophecy*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh.
- Pearcey, N., 2010, *Saving Leonardo : A call to resist the secular assault on mind, morals, & meaning*, B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, Tennessee.
- Van Rensburg, J.J.J., 1986. 'An Argument for Reading *νήπιοι* in 1 Thessalonians 2:7', in J.H. Petzer & P.J. Hartin (eds.), *A South African perspective on the New Testament: Essays by South African*

New Testament scholars presented to Bruce Manning Metzger during his visit to South Africa in 1985, pp. 252-259, Brill, Leiden.

Wanamaker, C.A., 1990, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A commentary on the Greek text*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich. (New International Greek Testament Commentary.)

Weima, J.A.D., 1997, 'An apology for the apologetic function of 1 Thessalonians 2.1-12', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 68, 73-99.

Weima, J.A.D., 2014, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Mich. (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament.)

Winter, B.W., 1993, 'The entries and ethics of orators and Paul (1 Thessalonians 2:1-12)', *Tyndale Bulletin* 44(1), 55-74.