

THE CHARACTER OF GOSPEL MINISTRY

Ben Janssen | 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 | September 27, 2020

¹ For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. 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. ³ For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, ⁴ 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 hearts. ⁵ For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. ⁶ Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. ⁷ But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. ⁸ So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

Last week, as we began our study of 1 & 2 Thessalonians, we noted that the entire first chapter of 1 Thessalonians is essentially a note of thanksgiving to God for the astonishing effects of gospel ministry in Thessalonica. But in verse five of the opening chapter, the Apostle Paul recalls to mind “the kind of men” that he and his team “proved to be among” the Thessalonians. Why does he bring up their behavior while they ministered there? The reason is that the gospel of Jesus will be characterized not only by what the gospel says (its message), but also by the cast of characters who proclaim it (its messengers).

This is inevitable. Any time you hear news, the person sharing the news is not insignificant to the hearing and understanding and believing the news. The message of the gospel, being carried by messengers, will be characterized not only by the content of the message itself but also by the character of the people who preach it.

So this is not an unimportant detail. As we enter the body of the letter of 1 Thessalonians here in chapter two, Paul would have us consider the character of gospel ministry. Through a series of contrasts—the adversative particle *but* shows up five times in these eight verses—Paul wants us to think not so much about what the gospel is, but how the gospel is to be proclaimed. The character of gospel ministry ought to be shaped by a people who are emboldened by God, strengthened by grace, and satisfied by the gospel. If we hope to see similar astonishing effects of gospel ministry in our day, then we ought to be this kind of people as we proclaim the gospel.

EMBOLDENED BY GOD

The first contrast is made in verses 1-2, where Paul reminds the Thessalonians that gospel ministry is characterized by people who are emboldened by God.

The Vanity of Timidity

When Paul says in verse one that his coming “was not in vain,” he does not want us to think so much about the results of gospel ministry in Thessalonica, but rather the character of it, because the contrast he sets up is between vanity (v. 1) and boldness (v. 2).¹ So the word *vain* in verse one

means something more like “powerless.” He wants us to see that the ministry in Thessalonica was done with supernatural power. With boldness, not timidity. It was powerful, not anemic.

Boldness and the Threat of Persecution

There are two ways we can notice this aspect of the gospel ministry’s supernatural character.

First, we can recall the condition in which Paul and his team arrived in Thessalonica. They had come from Philippi where they “had already suffered and been shamefully treated” (v. 2). In Philippi, Paul and Silas were mercilessly beaten and thrown into prison for preaching the gospel (Acts 16:22-23). So it is quite courageous to emerge out of that and go right back to preaching the gospel again. That takes boldness for sure.

But second, we can recall that things were not any less threatening in Thessalonica, and yet Paul and his team declared the gospel “in the midst of much conflict.” And the explanation Paul gives for the boldness they showed in spite of the threat of such severe persecution is that they had “boldness in our God.” In other words, they knew their God was powerful, but the gods of the culture in which they preached were powerless. So they had the courage to preach the gospel of the true and living God.

Confronting the Gods

Are you and I equally confident in the gospel of Jesus? If so, we will have supernatural boldness. If not, we will be silenced by our timidity.

The gospel of Jesus directly contradicts the gospel of the gods of every culture. There are false gods in China and false gods in Russia, but there are false gods in England and there are false gods in America. For too long Christians in the West have forgotten this and have become too cozy with the idols of our own culture. No wonder they do not have boldness in God to declare the gospel of God.

In his book, *Counterfeit Gods*, Tim Keller identifies three false gods in our culture today. It’s not the “bad and nasty things” that give us trouble, but the constant temptation of good things like prosperity, sexuality, and vocation that easily take over our lives. And there are religious versions of these things that subtly move devout people into idolatry.²

The gospel confronts these things. But it does so in a way that brings conflict with them. If you’re not experiencing the conflict, perhaps you’ve made peace with the idols of your culture.

And if you’re struggling to be bold in your gospel witness, perhaps it’s because you don’t see the power the gospel of Jesus has over the idols of your own heart.

Gospel ministry is characterized by boldness and not weakness because the gospel of God is not powerless in the face of the allure and threat of cultural idols.

STRENGTHENED BY GRACE

The second characterization Paul makes of gospel ministry is seen in the contrast made in verses 3-4. Those who preach the gospel most effectively are those who are not only emboldened by God but also strengthened by grace.

The Contest of Ideas

The contrast is set up by speaking here about the “appeal” of the gospel (v. 3). The Greek word refers to “emboldening another in belief or action.”³ The whole point of boldly proclaiming the gospel is to embolden others to believe it, too.

In this sense, the ministry of the gospel is much like the philosophical contests of the ancient world. A philosopher described his trade not as mere entertainment but as a contest.⁴ The goal of the contest was to persuade people to follow the philosophy as a way of life. This is what gospel ministry is. The goal of gospel proclamation is to make disciples by turning people away from the way of life they follow in devotion to their cultural gods (1 Thess 1:9).

Rules of Engagement

Now how should this be done? Gospel ministry takes a particular form in its rules of engagement, and this is the contrast Paul makes in these verses. The appeal of the gospel does not come “from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive” (v. 3). That is, the message is not false, the motivations are not impure, and the methods are not deceptive.⁵

The gospel does not get its appeal from an erroneous message. Christianity is a completely falsifiable religion. If it is not true that Jesus was crucified, buried, and physically raised to life three days later, “then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Cor 15:14). Christians must be uncompromisingly committed to truth, because the power of the gospel depends on it.

Similarly, the gospel does not get its appeal from impure motives. We do not gain any real disciples of Jesus if our goal in speaking the gospel to others is to win them to us rather than to Jesus. How many people have been turned away from any serious consideration of Christianity because of Christians who are more interested in making much of themselves than they are in making much of Jesus?

The gospel also does not get its appeal from deceptive methods. We do not win people to Christian discipleship by promising them their “best life now” rather than warning them that following Jesus will require us to deny ourselves and to carry a cross (Matt 16:24). We must be honest that it is only “through many tribulations” that we will enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). It would be far better for someone to reject Christ with eyes wide open than to be deceived into thinking he is a Christian because he did not know what it is the gospel demands when it urges him to become a disciple of Jesus.

Strong in Grace

How then should we engage in this contest? How do we ensure the gospel appeal comes without “error or impurity or any attempt to deceive”?

Paul’s answer in verse four is a bit complex on the surface, partly because it comes to us with a contrast of its own: “not to please man, but to please God.” But look closely and I think you can see the contrast. The appeal of the gospel comes when we speak “just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.” Remember how it is you got your ministry credentials, and then speak the gospel in the same way.

So how did you get your ministry credentials? What gives you the right to proclaim the gospel in the first place? Is it because you are intelligent and have completed some formal training? No, because all Christians are called to this ministry. Is it because you had your own “Damascus Road” experience, like Paul? No, because most Christians do not have such esoteric encounters with God. Is it because you have lived long enough? No, because even very young children can proclaim the good news of the kingdom. Is it because you’ve joined the right church or lived an exemplary Christian life long enough or read through the Bible multiple times. No, none of these things are the prerequisites for proclaiming the gospel.

What then is the prerequisite? What gives anyone the authority to proclaim the gospel? The answer has to be *grace*. And it is by grace that the gospel makes its appeal. The attraction of the gospel is the good news that you do not have to do anything to qualify for God’s love. Come to Christ, and in Christ you will have all God’s love. And in Christ you will find every qualification you could ever hope to achieve.

And by the way, this is why Paul can say that gospel ministry is done without any need to please man. Our aim is to please the one who enlisted us to his service by grace (2 Tim 2:4). If we owe our own gospel faith and credentials not to the work of any human being but to the work of our gracious God, then we do our business under his examination and not for the approval of anyone else.

Now *that* is appealing. That is freedom.

SATISFIED BY THE GOSPEL

Finally, the last contrast that Paul makes to highlight the character of gospel ministry is found in verses 5-7. And here we see that fruitful gospel ministry usually comes from people who are satisfied themselves by the gospel.

The Character of Celebrity

The first part of the contrast is in verses 5-6. Paul says that he did not come “with words of flattery . . . nor with a pretext for greed. . . . Nor did we seek glory from people.” In Paul’s day, a philosopher or other professional speaker was something like a famous musician or actor in our day.⁶ They were the ancient rock stars!

And flattery, greed, and glory are the kinds of things that describe a celebrity culture. Flattery is a key strategy for people-pleasing and getting what you want out of people. It works hand-in-hand with greed, doesn't it? And "glory" is a way of speaking of honor that comes when you are a big deal.

But these ought not characterize gospel ministry.

Sincere Humility

Paul knew this. So when he arrived in Thessalonica, he did not make "demands" as an apostle. He could have done so. He could have thrown his weight around. He was an apostle after all! It would have been right for others to give honor where honor is due. Paul himself urged the Philippian church to "honor such men" who serve the Lord honorably (Phil 2:29).

Nevertheless, Paul knew that the gospel is more characterized by humility than by celebrity. So when he arrived in Thessalonica, he and his team became "infants" among the Thessalonians. The ESV says "gentle," but the Greek text actually says "infants."⁷ He's trying to highlight the lowly position that he and his team took up as they carried out their ministry. He will tell us more about what this looked like in the next few verses. But it is the complete opposite attitude of some entitled celebrity.

When Paul says they were "infants" he does not mean temper-tantrum-throwing infants. He hastens to add that they were like infants who are being nursed by their mother, silent and content at their mother's breast. They are humble because they didn't need anything from the people to whom they ministered. They were satisfied by the gospel, so they did not need to jockey for power and position and prestige.

Celebrity culture is a culture of dissatisfaction, as any glance at the tabloids in the grocery store line will reveal. The gospel promises satisfaction that fame and riches cannot bring.

Gospel Relationships

Paul actually makes one more contrast in verse eight. And in this contrast, he says that the goal of the gospel is not just to win the argument but to also win the person.

Christianity is a religion of relationship, a real vital, living relationship with God and with his people. The Christian faith is a religion of truth, but it is a truth that is relational. We are wanting to win people to Jesus, who is the truth, who is also the way, but is also the life.

Gospel ministry, then, is characterized by a sharing not only of the gospel but a sharing of our own selves. The gospel gains its credibility in large part by the formation of gospel community, the kind of community everyone is looking for but nothing else but the gospel can produce.

¹ Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 32B, ed. David Noel Freedman (London: Yale University Press, 2008), [135-36](#).

² Sarah Pulliam Bailey and Tim Keller, “Review of American Idols: Tim Keller on Why Money, Sex, and Power so Easily Capture Our Affections,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 53, no. 11 (2009), [71](#).

³ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), PAGE., [766](#).

⁴ Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, [136](#).

⁵ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), [119](#).

⁶ *Ibid.*, [124](#).

⁷ That is, the external evidence favors the reading “infants” over “gentle.” See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed (Stuttgart, Germany: German Bible Society, 1994), [561-62](#).