

## **Gospel Shaped Church: *What Gospel Ministry Doesn't Look Like***

*1 Thessalonians 2:1-7a*

I'm calling this message; What GOSPEL ministry doesn't look like & the next one; What GOSPEL ministry looks like. This is the pattern the first 12 verses of this chapter generally follow. By pointing out the sincere character of their ministry in light of those undermining it & in light of those they were compared to Paul gives us help in evaluating what genuine gospel ministry should look like in order to help us discern who is the real deal...

One of the things we are to expect in the age we live in – between the first & second coming of Christ – is false teachers both outside & within the church. This is something which is meant to intensify towards the end of the age. We are repeatedly warned throughout the NT about this – antichrists, false teachers & deception. So one of the best things Paul can do is give us ways of judging the true from the false. This is one example of this. In the first chapter Paul gives us a way of evaluating if we ourselves are the real deal & here he gives us a way of evaluating if the preacher is the real deal.

Before we go any further I want us to see as we enter this second chapter that the gospel is still the focus. I don't want that to get lost. We are talking about gospel ministry & what it looks like. In fact the presence of the gospel is a primary way of assessing the validity of any ministry.

In verse 1 Paul says that in spite of previous persecution **“we had boldness in our God to declare to you the *gospel* in the midst of much conflict.”** He says in verse 4 **“but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the *gospel*.”** In verse 8 he says **“we were ready to share with you not only the *gospel* of God but also our own selves.”** In verse 9 he says; **“we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the *gospel* of God.”** Then finally in verse 13 he says; **“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the *word of God*, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the *word of God*, which is at work in you believers.”** And we've established already how this is just another way of describing the gospel. It is the word or message of God.

So we're in a new chapter but the focus is still the same & if Paul is not moving on from the gospel then neither can I. In chapter one among other things we covered where a local churches security is found, what Christianity looks like in action, the theme of being loved & elected by God, how the gospel powerfully works in our lives as the Holy Spirit brings assurance, how the church spreads the gospel it is shaped by & how Jesus delivers us from the wrath to come. We also touched on repentance, idolatry & the second coming & we have covered all of this without moving away from focusing on the gospel. I want us to see this: You can cover a lot of topics while faithfully preaching the gospel & you cover each one with the cornerstone of our faith always in view.

It's not that the same things are always being preached but that the same focus is always maintained. So that no matter what we preach on, we preach Christ, Christ & more Christ. The gospel helps ensure that no matter what text or what topic we're on Jesus is the hero of every sermon because Jesus is always what we need most. He is the essence & focus of Christian preaching.

So as we turn to the subject of what Christian ministry should not look like & what it should look like, let us not lose sight that we are talking about gospel ministry because like Paul this is the very essence of the ministry we & any type of Christian minister has been entrusted with. No minister is perfect, we know that, so that is not what we're looking for. However Paul's words help us to be discerning so we can sift the false from the genuine.

### **1. Gospel ministry does not cave in to opposition (v1-2)**

Look at the words used here: **"suffered"**, **"shamefully treated"** & **"conflict"**. This is how Paul, Silas & Timothy were treated... (Acts 16-17). The gospel does not sit well with surrounding cultures or surrounding religions or worldviews. It conflicts with them so a true minister of the gospel must resist allowing anything to condition it. Albert Mohler writes; *"The problem with cultural Christianity is that the culture always predominates over the Christianity."* Paul calls it **"the gospel of God"**, it is not the minister's gospel, a church's gospel or a culture's gospel to edit; it is God's gospel & therefore it is a settled gospel. We are simply the delivery service not the editors... So like Paul & co a true gospel minister will have **"boldness"** – it takes boldness for a reason – **"in our God to declare to you the gospel of God."** Boldness in God to declare the Gospel of God! The boldness of the minister is rooted in God; in his presence, in the fact he is the one who entrusted it, he is the tester of our hearts, he is witness & his approval is what matters. This awareness should be present in the true minister of the gospel; this is what emboldens him to not cave in & this is something to look for. **Listen to these words from 2 Timothy 1:8-14.** A true minister is a guardian of the entrusted gospel of God.

### **2. Gospel ministry does not spring from error, impurity or any kind of deception (v3-4)**

It is likely that Paul, Silas & Timothy were being branded with other travelling preachers who were known for their trickery & deception. It was common for frauds to travel from city to city tricking people to make money - support my ministry & God will bless you... Their interest is more on the money than the message. Paul distances himself from these accusations in the following verses. By doing so he gives every gospel minister a way of distancing themselves from such frauds & gives every person a way discerning true Christian ministry from false.

In these verses his focus is on purity of motives & life. Robert Murrey McCheyne wrote; *"The greatest need of my people is my own personal holiness."* Paul is highlighting that his preaching did not spring out of

delusion or impurity, nor was it something crafted for gain. It was something entrusted by God. If it had been crafted for gain the gospel would probably sound very different... Like *'come to Jesus & he will make you rich & take all your problems away. Just declare this over your life today & send me your credit card details to help me get my new much needed ministry jet & it will come to pass.'* Some things never change, do not be deceived by smooth talking preachers who promise you the world more than Christ. Paul's gospel was based on truth not falsehood.

His motives were not impure. The word impurity is often used regard sexual impurity so that is likely included. However the NIV is probably right to translate it *impure motives*, alluding to such sins as *'selfish ambition, pride, greed, & desiring popularity'*. Neither sexual impurity nor any of these things should be evident in the true minister of the gospel. When Paul writes; **"or any attempt to deceive"** he is highlighting that there was nothing devious about their methods. They made no attempt to manipulate conversions by concealing the cost of discipleship, playing on emotion or vulnerability, or by offering position or empty promises. As Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 4:2; **"But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."**

And again in our verses for today Paul's awareness of God's watchful eye comes through when he says; **"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."** Approved by God, entrusted with God's gospel & tested by God. Just as it is an awareness of God which emboldens the minister to not cave in; it is this same awareness of God which protects him from trusting in error, impure motives or trickery for ministry success.

God is the tester of our hearts. Seeing God as the tester of our hearts will protect us from error, impure motives & deceiving. God does not evaluate on the basis of outward appearance or results, but by the inner testing of the heart. Leave the results with God & focus on faithfulness to the entrusted message & sincerity of heart. God is more interested with a preacher's inner sincerity than with the outward popularity of his ministry. In fact if we do not grasp this we will cave in...

God is not testing us by our outward appearance or popularity but by our heart. This is both liberating & challenging. In the Bible the heart means the sum total of our inner dispositions, including the emotions, the intellect & the will. Paul is saying that all the motives & thoughts of the preacher are always open to God & that all his preaching has been done with full consciousness of this fact. Again this is something Paul tried to instil in young Timothy. Listen to 2 Timothy 4:1-5.

What we do for God we do before God. While Paul served people, he did not live to please them. His service was primarily to God. John Stott writes; *"To be accountable to him is to be delivered from the*

*tyranny of human criticism.*” I once read that if we live for the praises of men we will die from their criticisms.” Paul wrote in Galatians 1:10; **“For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.”** If you are going to be God’s man or woman you have to be content with God’s approval. For we speak **“not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.”**

### **3. Gospel ministry does not come with flattery or a mask, nor does it come looking for glory (v5-7a)**

The true gospel minister does not butter people up (flattery), nor does he try to fool people for gain & nor is he after trophies, recognition or prominence in his or her glory story. Gospel ministry glorifies Christ & Christ alone. Genuine gospel ministry delights in Christ getting all the glory!

The word **“flattery”** is to do with smooth talking, slick eloquence. Saying whatever one needs to say to obtain one’s own end. There is no room for this in gospel ministry. The phrase **“pretext for greed”** or **“mask to cover up greed”** (NIV) or **“cloak for covetousness”** (NKJV) is a loaded one. Leon Morris writes; *“Some translations concentrate on the money angle, but the word **pleonexia** denotes the general attitude of seek to have more. While it is often shown in desire for money, it is the spirit of desire in its most general sense, self-aggrandisement.”* This hit me hard. The desire to have more... self-aggrandisement! I looked that up in the dictionary. Self-aggrandisement means; *“an act undertaken to increase your own power & influence or to draw attention to your own importance.”* All this is behind this word – trying to build your own kingdom. Need for more power, more influence, more attention, more importance & more prominence.

Can I say today such things are a distraction from genuine gospel ministry & should not characterise genuine Christian ministry. They are a distraction from everything that should be important to the ministry of the gospel – pleasing God & exalting Christ! We should be infants (innocent & unaware) regarding such things... This should be true of all of us but it should be especially true of Christian leaders.

Sometimes the way Christians are taught about God having a plan & ministry for them feeds their desire for of these things, for self-aggrandisement. It can easily turn in Christian Xfactor – ‘this is all I’ve ever wanted, I’ve dreamt about this moment my whole life... me on the big stage...’ Whatever ministry we are entrusted with is not about us finding some place of prominence it’s about Christ being preeminent. Holding to the entrusted gospel of God ensures this more than anything!

Our dreams should have Jesus being glorified in them, not us. He is the one on the platform getting all the praise & we rejoice that we get to be the spotlight or camera person keeping the focus on him. That is the role of gospel ministry! For our deep conviction is that he is the Saviour, he is the life-giver & changer, he is the church builder, he is the situation turn-around-er, he is the soon coming King of the only kingdom

which will endure forever & therefore we are more than content, we are privileged in fact in getting to glorify him with our redeemed lives for we passionately believe & know he is what this world needs most! This is gospel ministry – GLORIFYING JESUS – it's never about us & always about him & in this we find a greater & freer purpose & satisfying joy than living for the emptiness of our own glory – which isn't really all that great if we're honest.

Gospel ministry is all about Christ-aggrandisement. You'll never be disappointed with not being the hero when you know who the real hero is & all he has done for you – HE ALONE IS WORTHY! This was Paul's motivation, to glorify God in Christ & once again he calls God as his witness. There's the awareness of God. If we truly get a glimpse of Christ's glory living for our own will seem so pointless.

To be a genuine minister of the gospel means to be innocent like an infant in regards these things – flattery & self aggrandisement – & dependent on the gospel like an infant is dependent on a mother. God reliance rather than self-reliance is a principle at the very heart of the gospel; this is the very reflex of the heart that trusts in Christ & of the true gospel minister.

Every attempt to flatter, deceive, people please or seek glory is a sign of lack of faith in the pure gospel. When we trust God & his gospel to do the powerful work God promises, our ministry will never be in vain, it will never be empty. How can it be empty if it is full of Christ?

While we are responsible to plant & water it is God who brings the increase according to his own plan & timing! When we truly understand the essence of the gospel we've been entrusted with we have no need to deceive, or talk ourselves up, prove our worth to others or to be pushy (which Paul could have opted for as an apostle). Quite the contrary we are free to be as innocent & dependant as infants...