

Hallmarks of Ministry

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Preacher: Al Gibbs

- [0 : 00] The scripture reading comes from 1 Thessalonians 2, starting in verse 1. Please follow along in your bulletin or Bible.
- For you yourself know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. 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.
- For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive. But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts.
- For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with pretexts for greed. God is witness.
- Nor did we seek made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.
- [1 : 17] So being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own self, because you had become very dear to us.
- For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil. We worked night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you. While we proclaim to you the gospel of God, you are witnesses and God also.
- How holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you, believers. For you know how, like a father with his children. We exhorted each of you and encourage you and charge you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.
- 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.
- For you, brothers, became imitators to the church of God and Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus Christ and the prophets, and drove us out and displeased God and opposed all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins.
- [3 : 02] But wrath has come upon them at last. This is the word of God. Great. Thank you, Jonah. Can I invite Al to come up this morning?
- One of the great things that being in the city of Hong Kong and being here amongst some of the other churches is there is a real sense of churches trying to work together.
- We have been so blessed by many churches ourselves, and we've been able to go and engage with other churches in the city. And one of the amazing things this morning is to have Al come to be with us from St. Andrews.
- Al is the Associate Minister of St. Andrews. We met, I can't remember when we met, a couple of years ago. I just had such an encouraging conversation.

Al has just got a real heart for Christ and for his people and really shepherding people in his congregation there. And one of the things you need to know about Al is, apart from the fact that he has a wife, two kids, and one on the way, he's also spent a lot of time in South Africa, which growing up in South Africa, so that's okay.

[4 : 16] We're used to that, but we'll forgive you. We'll forgive you for that. But if you repent of that, that's okay. No problem. But Al's going to come and bring, he's graciously agreed to bring God's word to us this morning.

So can I pray for you this morning? Father, I just want to thank you that where brothers dwell together in unity, there is your blessing.

And I'll thank you that in this city, there is one church, and it's your church. And we are not part of our own little kingdoms, but it's your kingdom. And Lord, I thank you for Al coming this morning.

I pray that you would speak to him, speak through him, and speak through him into our hearts, that we would hear your word, that we would be challenged and changed through him, and that we would learn to walk by faith and to be ministers of the gospel, as you call us to be.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Thank you so much, Chris. And as Chris has said, it's a real joy for me to be here with you this morning. It's great that we do have a network of churches that work together.

[5 : 24] I did spend quite some time in South Africa. I lived there until I was 15. But as you can tell, the accent has become a little bit British. So forgive me if I'm neither one thing or another thing.

I'm going to suggest, if you could keep open your booklets, that would be great, because we'll be having a look at these verses over here. Over the recent years, I don't know if you've noticed, but there's been a lot of films about con artists, people who can con, who can talk their way into kind of any situation for their own benefit.

So films like The Hustle, Inception, Parasite, Ocean's Eleven, and the remake, and all of the sequels. One film a bit like that, from a few years ago, is Catch Me If You Can.

I don't know if you remember it. Tom Hanks, Leonardo DiCaprio. And DiCaprio was actually playing a real-life figure called Frank Abagnale, who was a notorious con artist from the 60s.

So whilst he was still a teenager, he managed to convince people that he was a medical doctor, and actually practiced for several months. That's a bit scary. He also managed to pass the bar exam and conduct himself as a lawyer for several months.

[6 : 42] And he, as well as all of that, he convinced people that he was an aircraft pilot and took loads of flights, and at one stage, allegedly even took the controls of a passenger airplane full of people on board.

Well, fortunately, he has repented of his ways. He doesn't con people anymore. He now tries to help firms to avoid being conned. But there is something about these con films that we rather like, don't we?

We like hearing about con artists. We probably enjoy less actually meeting con artists, and it's not impossible that some of us have met con artists in the sort of wrong kind of situation.

Now, in One Thessalonians, that is the allegation that is being charged against Paul. That's the background to the whole letter, in a way, that Paul is nothing more than a con artist.

Now, we've been enjoying One Thessalonians at St. Andrews. We're just wrapping it up, actually, this Sunday. And so, I hope you don't mind me sharing a message from a few weeks ago.

- [7 : 43] And you may remember from the Book of Acts the situation that Paul, as was often his situation, as often his practice, when he arrived in Thessalonica, he went to the synagogue there, and he preached for just three Sundays.
- And a few people became Christians. They accepted Christ. He planted a little fledgling church. But then, a mob was rounded up, and he had to leave town in a hurry, all of these angry people.
- And afterwards, they went to those young Christians, and they said, well, you can't believe Paul. Paul is nothing more than a trickster, a charlatan. He's nothing more than a con artist. And this gospel message of his, well, that's just empty words.
- That's just ideology. That's just a pack of lies. You don't believe that he actually cares about you. He's tramping all over the place, planting churches. It's one just, it's just one big ego trip for him.
- He's after fame, and he's after your money. I mean, look, he's left town in a hurry. He's got something to hide. That's the kind of allegations that were coming through.
- [8 : 45] And if you read the letter through, it's so very clear. And so, Paul has to address these. And in chapter one, he firstly affirms the gospel and the faith of the Thessalonian church.
- He says, with this gospel message, it's not just empty words. No, it's God's power to transform you. And you yourselves are the evidence of that.
- Just see how you've changed. You've turned from worshipping idols to worship the Lord Jesus Christ and wait for him. Your lives are now marked by faith and hope and love.
- You've even accepted suffering. You bear all of the hallmarks of authenticity. That's chapter one. And now in chapter two, with what we're looking at today, Paul turns to himself and he says, and I bear all of the hallmarks of authenticity as well.
- Now, Paul isn't trying to boast here, big himself up. No, he's doing it for the sake of the Thessalonians. He knows that if they reject him, then chances are that in the end, they'll reject the gospel as well.
- [9 : 48] And so what we have here is like a little portrait of faithful gospel ministry. Now, Paul isn't saying that he's perfect. In other places, he admits that he's not perfect.
- But he is saying that he ticks these boxes of basic faithfulness. And he wanted the Thessalonians to be able to discern what counted as faithful gospel ministry and what wasn't faithful gospel ministry.
- And as such, these verses are very helpful for us. You know, we're inundated by people who claim to be Christian leaders. If you go onto the internet, there's no end of people who want you to watch their video and read their blog and buy their book.
- And some of those teachers are excellent. And sadly, some of those teachers are not. And we need to be able to discern what's faithful teaching and what isn't.
- It's also very helpful for gospel ministers, this passage that we should reflect on our own ministry and to think, am I doing what the Bible says? But more than that, these marks, these things that Christian ministers are meant to do are for us all.
- [10 : 54] You see, the Bible tells us that we're all the ministers. We're all the pastors in the church. Sadly, Kevin, your senior pastor, has been unwell. We've been praying for him.
- Praise the Lord that he's on the mend. But he's not the only pastor here. Nor is just Chris or Henrika or Jeremy or the rest of the staff team. No, the Bible says if we're a Christian, then we're all the pastors.
- We're all the ministers. And so we should all be doing these things. So whether we're in Sunday school or helping to lead a community group or whether we're a parent teaching our children or whether we're just one ordinary Christian trying to encourage another ordinary Christian, these are things that we should all do.

All aspire to do. We won't do them perfectly but these are things that we should do. Now we're going to split our passage up into three. Forgive me, I am a kind of three-point sermon guy.

So we've got three points this morning. I'm sorry about that. Three points. Firstly, right motives. Right motives. So have a look with me at verse one. Paul says, remember back to how we lived amongst you.

[11 : 58] And he uses this phrase again and again, you know. You know how we lived. Verse one. But you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully cheated 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.

So he's saying, remember back to what happened. We arrived in your city and we'd just come from Philippi. In Philippi, Paul had preached the gospel and he'd been opposed. An angry crowd tried to take hold of him.

The city officials, they arrested Paul but instead of protecting him from the crowd, they unlawfully beat him and threw him into prison. Eventually, he managed to extricate himself from prison but that didn't stop him.

Then he went on to Thessalonica and he was opposed there. He had to leave in a hurry. Next, he went to Berea. Again, he was opposed and had to leave in a hurry. Then he went on to Athens. His message was mainly rejected.

Eventually, he found himself in the city of Corinth where he was writing this letter from and he's saying, remember how our lives were. We weren't doing it for fame and glory and money.

[13 : 10] No, it was highly inconvenient for us sharing the gospel with you and that shows that our motives were right. See what he goes on to say in verses 3 and 4.

For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive 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.

For we never came with words of flattery as you know nor with a pretext for greed. God is our witness. He's saying, look, we never did any of that con artist stuff. We never used flattery to get into your good books.

We never put on a mask to hide greed in our hearts because we were after your stuff. No, we weren't trying to please ourselves or to please others or even really firstly to please you.

No, as custodians of the gospel firstly we were seeking to please the Lord not con artists. One of the most infamous con artists in the animal kingdom if you can call it that is the angler fish.

[14 : 19] I don't know if you know about angler fish. I'm at the stage where my oldest daughter is three years old so I'm always showing her pictures of animals and things and the angler fish is this rather grotesque fish that lives in the murky depths of the ocean where there's hardly any light at all and it's got this bulbous protrusion that comes off that someone's nodding.

You know what I'm talking about at least. Or the top of its head which glows in the light and the little fish are attracted to this and they swim up to it and then it just swallows them with one big gulp.

Fortunately, it's only this big so you don't have to worry too much about the angler fish but there's almost a sense in which some gospel ministers are sadly a bit like that.

They're holding out the light of the gospel in a dark world and people are attracted to that but their intention all along is to exploit those people and so we hear about ministers who are after money.

They're stolen from their church. They're paying themselves huge salaries. They've got luxury cars and private jets. Meanwhile, their congregation is impoverished after money or after fame.

[15 : 28] They've turned ministry into a vehicle for self-promotion. It's all about them and what they're doing and their latest CD and their latest book and Paul here is defending himself against that.

He's saying, look, I really wasn't that kind of con artist Christian minister. I really wasn't. Just remember to how I lived amongst you. You know. It wasn't like that.

It had the right motives. Right motives. And I think this reminder about having right motives in what we do is so important. It's so easy if you're anything like me.

It's so easy to do what seems to be the right thing for the wrong reasons. Now, we'll never have perfect motivation because we have a sinful nature. We can't wait until our motives are perfect before we do something because otherwise we'll never do it.

But we do need to work on our motivation and I need to be reminded that sometimes at church it's so easy first to be thinking about what other people think about what we're doing whether that's in the music team or whether we're serving in kids zone or Sunday school to be thinking about other people and to want their affirmation.

[16 : 35] It's not wrong to want to please others but we need to remind ourselves we're doing this firstly to serve the Lord to please Him. The same is true in evangelism.

We know that we should be doing evangelism and it's possible to do that in a way to please ourselves just so that we get it off our conscience phew, I've told them I can rest now or to convince other people that we're keen other Christians can see that we're bringing our friends to church and that we're a keen Christian but we should be doing evangelism firstly to serve the Lord and to please Him.

Equally wrong motivation can keep us from service. For instance if we firstly are thinking about serving our boss and getting ahead in our career then we might be quite reluctant to take on additional responsibility at church because it might get in the way or if we're seeking to please ourselves if someone asks us to take on a role on the welcome team or the AV we might think well this is quite menial and inconvenient I don't really want to do it.

Well gospel ministry wasn't convenient for Paul but he was willing to do it because he had the right methods inspired through the gospel and what Jesus had done for him.

Right methods and secondly right methods. So Paul says well I was an apostle and I could have made demands of you but I didn't live like that.

[18 : 01] Instead verse 7 have a look with me he says but we were gentle among you like a nursing mother taking care of her own children 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.

Well Paul is making an analogy here saying that he's like a mother and mothers I think are really the epitome of caring that's true isn't it and I see that very much first hand in my wife as Chris has said we've got a little girl who's three and one who's one and another little girl who's coming in October we're absolutely thrilled by that it is quite an exhausting phase of life and a lot of that falls on the mum now obviously dads have to do their part but there's some things that dads can't easily do and so the mums are the ones who end up doing a lot of it and they just keep on giving and giving and giving and I see that in my wife just the epitome of caring and Paul is making this comparison here now I don't think that we need to misunderstand him he isn't trying to claim motherhood for himself he's not trying to say that he understands all women he's just using an image that most people can understand and he's saying look we cared for you we didn't want to be a burden at all we weren't so often Paul would get a job as a tent maker or repairing tents and he's saying look remember how we lived amongst you during the day we were working hard repairing and making those tents and then in the evening we'd come and we'd tell you about Jesus and we'd do a bible study and we'd pray together and we'd be there late in the evening up in the early morning repairing those tents and all the while we were opposed and sometimes even fearing for our lives but through it all it was worth it because we really cared about you like a mother and also like a father see what he says in verse 11 for you know how like a father with his children we exalted each of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory now again

I don't think Paul is trying to promote gender stereotypes he's just saying that in the average family so often the mother is a bit more gentle and the father is often but not always a bit more stern often in a helpful way and he's saying we were a bit like a dad to you we set you an example through our conduct through our speech and we wanted the best for you we didn't pander to you no we were willing to have that slightly more difficult conversation because we wanted you to really live for the Lord Jesus Christ there's a kind of honesty and straightforwardness gentleness on the one hand and honesty and straightforwardness and sometimes those things are lacking from Christian leadership there can be a lack of gentleness some Christian leaders are so determined in their zeal to build the kingdom that they become quite authoritarian and domineering in order to get things done and that might work in the short term but in the end it always leaves a trail of destruction and sadly over recent years there's been a number of high profile pastors who've had to step down from their ministry amongst allegations of bullying and abuse now that is absolutely scandalous a Christian leader should not be a bully

Paul was not a bully Christian leaders should be gentle gentle but also honest and forthright some Christian leaders are so scared about upsetting anyone that they're not willing to say to anyone hey you're a Christian you shouldn't be doing those things but for Paul the gentleness and the forthrightness went hand in hand that's how it works for Christians gentleness and forthrightness go hand in hand Paul was willing to get emotionally involved in the lives of these individuals not a kind of professionalism keeping them at arm's length no he says we loved you so much that we were willing to share our lives our very selves getting emotionally involved now I think that's a big challenge for us here in Hong Kong getting emotionally involved you know we lived in a city that's just packed with people and so many of those people are stressed and angry and tired and don't have much energy and we're stressed and tired and without much energy and it's easy for us to say to ourselves well if I had more time and energy and more emotional resources then maybe I could help but I just don't have it in me to deal with all of the stuff that's going on in other people's lives at the moment but brothers and sisters the Christian way is to get involved to get emotionally involved in other people's lives now obviously we all have our limits in a larger congregation like this we can't get to know everyone which is why

I think our small groups are so important and at St. Andrews we're always saying join we call them growth groups join a growth group join a growth group join a growth group because of course in these smaller groups we're able to study the Bible and pray but more than that to really get to know each other and support each other so that if we hear that someone in our community group is going through a rough patch well we pray for them but more than that we bring them up and we say hey how are you doing can I take you out for lunch can we go out for coffee what can I do to help you because we really can and if we hear that someone in our community group is maybe making a bad decision or fallen into some kind of sin then we don't ignore it we don't bulldoze they know we're gentle but we don't do nothing at all instead we get in touch with them and we say brother, sister I care about you very much but these are the reasons why I think this may not be the right course of action and these are the verses in the Bible that say that maybe this is not the right thing to do and we're willing to have that conversation and the potential pushback that we might receive in it because we care about that person right motives right methods and finally right message well Paul is talking about a gospel message here which is not his own look with me at verse 13 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 it really is the word of God which is at work in you believers say he repeats word, word, word it's not his word it's the Lord's word and it's a word which is opposed see what he says in verse 14 for you brothers became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out and displeased God and opposed all mankind well Paul is making the point here that from beginning to end this message was opposed now he mentions the Jews not because he's anti-semitic of course he's a Jew himself he has a deep love for the Jewish people but he's making this point that from beginning to end this gospel message was opposed it was first preached in Jerusalem and there was opposition that message spread all over the place and now even in Thessalonica there was opposition even from their own countrymen that is what the Thessalonians had experienced so opposition and suffering was intrinsic is intrinsic to the gospel message and isn't that what we see in the Lord Jesus Christ the Lord Jesus Christ was opposed the Lord Jesus Christ suffered and died when he bled on the cross in order to bring

[26 : 18] God's love into this broken world in order that we might receive his forgiveness and if you're here and you're still exploring the Christian faith then all you need to do to receive God's forgiveness for sins that our shame might be washed away is to say Lord Jesus I'm trusting in you I'm trusting in your suffering in my place that's all we have to pray and our sins are washed away but even as we receive Christ the Bible says that we also need to submit to Christ's authority that we need to pick up our cross daily and that leads us inevitably into a path of opposition and even of suffering but that aspect of the gospel is often deeply unpopular today and sometimes people want to minimize it and even to deny it so take for instance two ways in which that sometimes happens liberal theology amongst other things I think liberal theology often says well you don't need conflict in the Christian life the main thing is that we're a nice person and that we get on with everyone else and don't worry too much about doctrines and the miracles and other religions and the resurrection and things like that it doesn't matter exactly what you believe so long as you're a nice person we don't need conflict liberal theology or another another form of false teaching is prosperity gospel which in many ways says we don't need suffering in this world that God loves this world and he wants to bring an end to pain which is true but that we can have that now if we just believe and trust then he'll give us healing and he'll give us health and wealth and self-actualization and we can receive all of our dreams now we don't have to have suffering in this world well those two forms of teaching are at variance with the apostle Paul's personal experience and so clearly with the verses that we've been looking at this morning and it's important that we as Christians are able to discern that you know sometimes people come up to me at St. Andrews and they say oh Pastor Al

I was watching YouTube last week and there was a brilliant guy on that and I watch him every week and you should really watch him too you'll love him and then they mention the name of the person and my heart sinks because it's a well-known prosperity gospel preacher or liberal theologian and just because someone holds a bible and smiles and tells a few nice stories and is emotionally engaging doesn't make them faithful we need to be able to discern what's faithful ministry and what's not of course I'm not talking about watermark church but the ministry here is very faithful I mean more what's out there on the internet and in the books that we read now Paul was that kind of faithful minister even through the opposition even through the persecution he went to Thessalonica and the Lord used him to richly bless those Christians there he told them about Jesus he led them to Christ he nurtured them he disciplined them he wrote to them he prayed for them he sent other Christians to look after them and it was a wonderful thing now we haven't had the privilege of being led to Christ by an apostle but if you're a Christian here today then the Lord would have used someone in your life in order to richly bless you and I want to ask who is that person and who are those people just think back

I can think of many people in my life like that take for instance a few just to mention take for instance my parents my parents would describe themselves as ordinary people and ordinary Christians but every single Sunday they went to church and every single morning they got up a little bit early in order to read the Bible and pray and as a young person that made an enormous impact on me or take for instance my youth group when we immigrated from South Africa to the UK I was a confused Christian teenager trying to figure out what it meant to be a Christian in a foreign culture and having a youth group to journey alongside me was profoundly helpful during that time or when I was at university I arrived at university not really sure what I wanted to do with my life and it was really really helpful when an older Christian from the local church met up with me for about six months in order to read the Bible and pray and that started to change the whole trajectory of my life as I began to think more seriously about Christian ministry now my hunch is that you probably have people like that in your life as well everyday people ordinary people broken people sinful people but people who nevertheless the Lord has used to bless you richly and I think part of the challenge of this passage is whether we're willing to be that kind of person to the people whom God has put in our lives and to the people whom God has put in the room around us and we might feel like we don't have much time or that we don't have much experience or that we're the wrong kind of character remember the apostle Paul he was completely the wrong kind of character and the Lord turned his life around and used him to richly bless others the Lord can use you to richly bless others and what we see in this passage is a little portrait of how we go about doing that right motives not seeking to please others first but seeking to please the Lord right methods being gentle but also honest right methods sticking faithfully to that good news of Jesus Christ despite opposition and suffering let's pray heavenly father thank you so much for your rich goodness to us in the Lord Jesus Christ thank you that he suffered and died that we might have forgiveness a new life and renewal and thank you that you bring that renewal through everyday ordinary broken people thank you for the example of the apostle Paul and the way that you used him to bless that church in Thessalonica thank you for the ways in which you've used people in our lives to bless us and strengthen us in our walk and help us we pray and show us how we can do that and be used by you to bless others

Amen