

1/24/21 - 1 Thes. 2:1-6 - "Contending for the Gospel"

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[0 : 00] As we enter into this second chapter in our series titled Dear Church, we're reminded of a couple things.

We're reminded that this isn't just a couple detached prepositional phrases or sort of detached imperative clauses of what to do, what not to do.

But what we're entering into in 1 Thessalonians, starting in chapter 2, and it's going to continue to chapter 3, is we're entering into Paul's conviction of ministry.

We're going to see his heart for ministry, specifically his heart for those who are laboring with him in ministry. It's sort of known that if Romans is this robust book of Paul's theology, well, we can look at 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 and chapter 3.

In the same light, only this is now Paul's heart in conviction for other people in ministry, his co-workers in ministry.

[1 : 08] This passage is all concerning Paul contending. Three vital approaches of what he is contending.

It's number one, he's contending for his character. He's contending for his message. And he's contending for his motives. And within all three of these, there's one unifying factor.

In all of them, he's contending for the gospel. In that, we will see that the character of a church's leadership is directly reflected by those in its membership.

Similar, just simply saying, if the church leadership is unified, the church will ultimately be unified. If the church leadership are presenting qualities and characteristics of being certain individuals that are set apart in the world, the church will pick up on that and begin to imitate that.

But chapter 1 gives detailed support of the vibrancy and the unity of the church, being that they were enduring, they were proclaiming the gospel, and they were participating in the ministry.

[2 : 22] And so, the health of that church, as observed in chapter 1, is a direct reflection of that mimicking, that imitation that the church had for Paul, as Paul had of Christ.

Now, this can take a bad turn, as we all know. Sadly, there's this toxin called sin that reaches into the depths of man, specifically those of influence.

And when this sinfulness is modeled within leadership and even accepted at times, it will naturally spill out and it will manifest within the attitudes and actions of the following congregants.

Through mimicking, through that imitation. And when this toxin embeds in the heart of the church through its leaders, its mission becomes compromised and diverted from glorifying God to glorifying self.

It is a sad reality, really. And something that Paul's opponents were attempting to discredit Paul of by capitalizing upon his absence to corrupt the gospel mission that he began, that this church began.

[3 : 36] These opponents were opportunists. They kicked Paul out of Thessalonica in Acts 17, as we read the first week we started this series. And so, Paul's gone.

Now it's time to capitalize upon promoting what we believe to be the agenda that we have for these people that are now no longer under our influence.

And so, Paul came in. Obviously, he contended for the gospel in those synagogues. It got him kicked out in Acts 17. No wonder they were probably mad that he's causing all this disruption.

How everything used to be. Now, all of a sudden, Paul comes in with this gospel message about faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone. Right? No wonder they were mad.

If his opponents wanted to destroy Paul's church plants, they'd have to destroy Paul's message. And if they could destroy Paul's message, they'd have to go after Paul's character.

[4 : 34] Because if everything was imitative, then this is how to start going after character. Today, we will see the heart of a true gospel minister. How to protect ourselves from those out to deceive and fixate our minds upon the same message and motive that drove Paul to endure.

And most of all, we will see Christ in this passage. How we, too, can confidently imitate our leaders as they are imitators of Jesus Christ.

Please join me in prayer as we begin. Father, thank you for your word today. Thank you for a letter that is so profoundly applicable to our lives.

It isn't just a bunch of prepositional phrases or imperative clauses. This is the living and breathing word of God that is perfect. It is inerrant and sufficient to encourage us and to correct our course in life.

Father, we look upon your word to encourage us in that way. Guide us and help us by the power of your Holy Spirit to understand and how to apply your word today. Praise in Jesus' name. Amen.

[5 : 47] The first section that we have today is testing of character. And we're going to ask this question of will you endure in this test of character?

Verse 1 says, For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.

He says, For you yourselves know, church. At this time, Paul is compelled to recall the memory of who God had placed within his life in Thessalonica.

To recall upon their memory of something that they know. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, that speaks louder than the pages of history in a man or woman's life.

Who they are. This is why Paul recalls upon their memory in verse 1. For you know yourselves, brothers, that our coming was not in vain. He also points out to recall something specific in mind in verse 2 in this passage.

[7 : 18] To recall something specific and that being the suffering that he endured on behalf of the gospel of God. And through that, we have a character test.

If he's calling upon them to remember that his coming was not in vain and points them to the suffering that he endured, we see that suffering.

Endurance in this life, in ministry specifically, is a test of character. Credibility in character is displayed best while enduring suffering and shameful treatment of others.

Or in other words, when things get tough, those futile in character don't endure. Those are revealed as people who are in it and laboring for themselves when things are comfortable and how they want it.

But when things get tough, when there's opposition, when there's affliction, that's when true character shines. And Paul says here that he had the right motives.

[8 : 21] And it was proved to be so because of how he suffered greatly for the gospel and not himself. We see the apostles suffering back in Acts. If you want to look there, we're going to be around Acts chapter 16, verse 20-ish.

But in Acts 16, specifically, the apostles suffered greatly. We see in verse 22, they were beaten. We see in verse 24, the apostles were incarcerated.

We see in verse 20 that they arrogantly mistreated or mistreated with false accusations. We see that they were illegally punished in verse 37 and even over to chapter 17, verse 5.

They suffered physical intimidation. And to the very beginning of this church plant, they were accused of civil treason in Thessalonica. And that's in verse 7.

And there's sort of this connection between the man and his message. How a minister of the gospel responds in suffering matters.

[9 : 40] Because steadfastness drives integrity of character, which then drives the integrity of the message and his motives. You can't detach the two. We see that being an importance in the call of elder pastor overseer in Titus and Timothy.

You see that these characteristics and qualifications within those callings are resounding on the character before it gets to the message, before it gets to the motives. It all goes to character.

Because it's true that if the character is right, then the message will be right. The motives will be pure. And there was probably numerous reasons why Paul could have not contended for the gospel in Thessalonica.

However, there's one reason that reminded him why he should contend for the gospel in Thessalonica, regardless of the opposition he received. His calling and ministry and his mission is not found upon his own disposal.

He can't just accept and deny whenever he wants. The calling of God is something sure and steadfast. And it's the driving force within his life. We see in verse 2, the message of the gospel was the force of Paul's motivation to keep laboring through the suffering in Acts 16, as we saw.

[11 : 00] We see that in verse 2. He says, This brings to mind the sufferings of Jesus Christ, doesn't it?

The lashing, the ripped body, torn apart, pierced hands and feet, all the suffering he endured equally brought credibility to God's purposes through him, as well as the message that he bore.

But it's the same for us today. Those who oversee the church are often the brunt of vivid accusations. However, those who endure in spite of opposition prove to be worthy in character and calling.

We have to be reminded it is God who calls us to a work. We saw that throughout the past two weeks within the first chapter.

It is God who calls us to the work, whether that work being affliction, whether that work being proclaiming the gospel, or the work being participating in that gospel.

[12 : 16] So if it's God who calls us to the work, it is equally God who will sustain us as we endure the laboring required for that work. This is truly a test of authenticity of all of our lives, really, and especially the church's witness of the gospel.

So what does your endurance in life reveal about God's calling? Is it something that you accept on Sunday and maybe put away on Monday through Saturday?

What do you contend for in your life when you're out at your job and working? Are you contending for the gospel in your speech?

Are you contending for the gospel in your motives? Are you imitating your church leadership in the world? Or are you imitating the world?

Section two brings another test. We see the testing of the message. Asking a simple question, what is the appeal?

[13 : 27] Verse three continues. He says, 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 for a pretext for greed. God is witness. Paul's attention turns from his integrity of character and redirects us now to the integrity of his message.

He's sort of connecting the relationship within the two. In a contrasting manner, Paul provides some interesting insights of what was potentially going on at this day and time.

Obviously, being so separate from the culture back in the second century church, we can have hints of maybe what it was like. But one commentator states, There has probably never been a variety of religious cults and philosophic systems as in Paul's day.

Quote, I wrote, I read that, I'm like, Well, apart from crackpots and cranks, I don't know if we can necessarily identify those individuals and those teachings of our day.

[15 : 27] But this list provides a vivid picture of what the culture was like back then, and it's not too far different from what it is today at all.

The least bits. Truly, there is nothing new under the sun. And so we could imagine at this time, with all the philosophers, the magicians, the astrologers, all these compelling people with compelling beliefs and compelling comments against why they shouldn't be following Paul and be part of Paul's ministry, we could imagine that their comments would cast doubts upon the Thessalonians.

Obviously, we want to be serving God how he desires for us to serve him, specifically finding that direction and that roadmap within the Word of God.

But we always want to be sure. We want to test ourselves. So they would bring in comments that are compelling. Oh, don't believe Paul. Where's Paul? He was here for a couple weeks.

He doesn't care about you. He's in it for himself. He just wanted to take up that tithe and tell you to throw something in the red box back at the threshold and be on your way.

[16 : 47] Don't believe that guy. Believe us. You can imagine the accusations as Paul was absent to defend his own ministry. And as that excerpt says, people were jostled, clambered, and they were after the attention of the believing and the skeptical.

It is the truth that Paul stands upon. Paul stands upon the truth, and we see that in this passage. The truth of who he is. The truth of God's calling upon his life.

There is nothing more rooting in our lives than remembering who we are and whom we belong to, especially when things get tough. I'm going to say a little phrase, and I want you to finish the phrase.

If Les calls for your participation and saying good morning, I call for your participation now, you will all know it. It goes something like this. Sticks and stones may break your bones, but...

Right. Glad you were all paying attention in kindergarten. Paul knew better than anyone what the principle of that phrase indicates.

[18 : 14] That nothing, no accusation, can take away who he is, the calling upon his life, and who he belongs to. There's nothing that could take that away.

Similar to a deeply rooted post in the ground that a car may maybe sidewind off the road and try to avoid hitting a house so they think, well, maybe I'll hit a mailbox or two.

And that the mailbox being rooted deep within the ground, deep within the earth, has layers of concrete, is so deeply rooted in its footing that it actually destroys and totals that car.

A small little fence post. Paul stood strong in his footing. People can sling their stones, but Paul's footing is rooted in the gospel. They could even kill him.

They could take his own life. And none of that changes the fact of who he is and his purpose. Man could not thwart God's call.

[19 : 17] And for us, as we are all ministers of the gospel, we are all participants, right, from last week in the gospel, is imitating that meeting with people, ministerial efforts, wherever you might be in your workplace, in your break room, of opening up the word of God with believers and unbelievers, for us being servants of God.

The servant of God is one whose highest allegiance is to the one who commissions. And there's no word that can ever take that away.

And for leaders, especially me, if you guys were on the chopping block last week, I'm on the chopping block today. For leaders, the minister of the gospel is one who duly understands the cost of obedience, that you're going to walk into opposition in very difficult times as a minister of the gospel.

But you also know duly the cost of your disobedience, the account that you will have to give to God for either or that you decide to choose.

Those who oversee the church are judged at a more strict level than those who are overseen, as we see in James 3. It is in that that God provides a specific task and will judge accordingly to how that task was carried out.

[20 : 46] Man may judge, but who is man compared to God? The minister's identity is solely found in God. It makes me think of parents, the relationship between a parent and a child, and where the parent sets rules, sets these boundaries, sets curfews.

Come on, you can't be the only people who had curfews. I'm not the only person that had a curfew going through high school. And all these rules and really, mom?

Really, dad? You guys are so unfair, right? All these accusations that a child can have towards their parents. And we have that subordinate and insubordination sort of coming and culminating within that little idea of a parent and a child.

And often we see that even in the church where an elder is trying to protect and guard and defend the gospel, and sometimes that comes in opposition.

Sometimes that comes with a little bit of resistance. That doesn't mean that those bad elders are being mean again. Just like mom and dad.

[21 : 57] No, they care about you. They care about your spiritual well-being. They care about who you're being made and conformed to be. And sometimes that gets messy, especially when sin is mixed in the middle of everything.

Not for the faint of heart. In this, the overseers of the church are able to rest well at night, knowing that if the world hates them for the labor that God entrusted, it holds no weight to the account that he will give to God one day.

You all know of Jonathan Edwards' story, right? About his church. They took care of that problem real quick. Jonathan Edwards was removed from the church because they wouldn't conform.

If there is any success to be identified in life, it is only centered upon biblical obedience. But consider the enticing crackpots and cranks of that day.

I love that. I'm going to start using that more often. There was a clear tactic that was common among them.

[23 : 17] And Paul mentions it in this passage. It's something that Paul experienced and the church even today experiences. It's called flattery. This is a form of manipulation which grooms its victims in value and worth.

And it is through the tactic of flattery that disarms our discernment and appeals to our emotions. When our discernment is disarmed and emotions begin to lead us of the value that somebody gives us, we are susceptible to all kinds of spiritual abuse which involves danger laying ahead.

Flattery. And Paul makes it clear that this is not the case because obviously this church in the Thessalonian church was very flattered.

I would be very flattered to get a message from Paul with the content being found in chapter 1 of how proud he is of the church, of hearing reports reinforcing that they're dedicated to the mission of the gospel.

Paul makes it clear that he's not flattering them. He was not in ministry for himself, for any greedy gain. If he were greedy, I am sure that he would have actually been gone long ago which comes into the test of his character again in section 1 of this passage.

[24 : 59] Paul was driven and endured due to his devotion to that which lay outside of himself and even his circumstances. And in this, Paul knows that man can sling his stones but man cannot see or give an account to the depths of his heart.

And for that reason, Paul labored not for the approval of man but for the approval of God who knows the heart as we see in this passage. Jesus Christ was the supreme example of endurance, wasn't he?

And through his endurance leading to the cross, having multiple different chances to release the punishment that he was being called to endure, the crucifixion and the cross, he had chances of admitting a fault or maybe just saying, no, I didn't say that, no, and totally discredit the entire message.

He didn't give an answer. He often was not found defending himself. This displayed the purity of his life in that his allegiances lay not in this world.

He doesn't give an account to man. He gives an account to God alone. And so today, we must remember this throughout our lives. So living according to the example of Paul, being imitators of Paul, we need to check our hearts every now and then.

[26 : 30] And this comes through accountability, through the assembled body of Christ, through the church memberships of looking around once in a while, looking at the church directory as we're praying for one another as we should be throughout the week, church, as we're looking upon that directory and coming to mind of people we haven't seen in a while.

This is all through accountability within the Ecclesia church. So does your heart proclaim the gospel? If you were to give an account to God for the condition of your heart, does it give an account of contending for grace or maybe greed?

As we look at the final parts of this passage, the last section that we'll be seeing is another test. The testing of motives.

I'm going to start in verse five and lead into verse six. Verse five says, for we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed. God is witness.

Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. In this last section, Paul draws upon his motives that are the underlying current, current that are carrying the gospel message forward.

[28 : 04] It's that underlying current. You know, you've been to the ocean, you know, the current kind of draws things out from the shoreline. Paul draws upon his motives that they are the underlying current that which carries the gospel message forth.

Even accusations were not enough to stop Paul from his dedicated mission to the Lord because it is not man that he labors for but solely unto God alone. And now the terrifying but sometimes comforting reality to gospel ministers is that God is our witness.

That can be very terrifying and very comforting depending on the season that you're in. If Paul's motives were pure, he was assured that God witnesses the truth and will one day vindicate Paul in judgment to come against his accusers.

We see that judgment in 2 Corinthians 5.10 where it says, for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may receive the things done in the body according to what we have done whether good or bad.

The judgment seat of Christ. truly the accusations of man are powerless. Truly powerless compared to the affirmation of God.

[29 : 36] Paul understood this, but do we? Truly, do we understand this? If Paul stood strong, the church stood strong through that imitative behavior.

And this is the truth that kept Paul going. Paul knew very well who he was, the basis of his message, and the purity of his motives. In this, Paul says confidently that he could have easily, easily coerced these people in order to gain from them.

He says that in verse 6. However, he used his authority to contend for the gospel. His end was not greed, but grace.

His method was not flattery, he was giving hope. And his means were not deception, it was truth. May it be true for us in our laboring, wherever God may have you in this life.

As we come to a close today from this passage, it is through situations of affliction that often makes us question ourselves the most.

[30 : 50] Right? I see some people emphatically going like this. I'm glad you're still awake. I'm glad that you're not getting arthritis.

Gene, don't do that today. Your doctor will have me in handcuffs. It is through situations of affliction that often makes us question ourselves the most.

I want to draw a couple of situations and connect a few situations for you of what I'm saying in that. For anybody married, or maybe you aren't married, but you have parents who were married and you see marital strife.

From a marital perspective, from a spouse, when you're going through affliction, you're often probably asking yourselves at times, depending on the level of that affliction, do I even want to sleep in the same bed as you tonight?

I'm so upset. Or even in some situations, did I marry the right person? We ask these questions often when we experience affliction in our jobs.

[32 : 04] When we experience affliction in our jobs. Did I choose the right employment? Did I go to school for the right thing? right? We see it in relational strife.

Should I trust this person? We see that in Israel's strife, right? Moses, you've led us out here to die.

It is through situations of affliction that often makes us question ourselves the most. And when we ourselves, we find ourselves questioning, church, we have to recall upon our memory.

We have to recall upon our memory. So, we're looking at church conflict here. In church conflict, as we see, Paul was in the midst of it.

Can we trust our leaders? Can we trust Paul? Maybe the grass is greener on the other side. God. Well, Betty and Sue went back to the synagogue that Paul was contending for the gospel, and maybe we'll just go follow Betty and Sue back to the synagogue.

[33 : 15] Maybe we should go too. We too must remember, recall upon our memory even in affliction. Even at Youngstown Metro Church, your leaders make a covenant with you.

Every elder that is appointed within this church makes a covenant, and the congregation makes a covenant back. It is a partnership. relationship of that reality. And dually is a commitment to one another.

Each day I pray for you and remind myself of that covenant that I have with you, that I've made with you, and it's all for the sake of contending for the gospel in your life and through this church.

So can we trust our leaders as we see that being a question in this passage? The word of God has provided a gauge of discernment to evaluate these questions. much of that gauge is contingent upon the steadfastness of its leaders to endure affliction, to endure accusation, and their character can be tested over the course of history.

The unity of leadership in any organization is vital to the efforts made through those that they lead and all the endeavors that they accomplish together.

[34 : 32] better. And how much more is this vitally important for the church as we are all contending for the gospel? For the church, what is placed at the center of leadership must only be the gospel, and we need your help in contending for that.

When the gospel is at the center of the church's leadership, the gospel will naturally be the center of all the church's affairs. others. It will stem forth from leadership and be imitated throughout.

If a church is marked by imitation of one another's leadership, this is a call upon all churches to remove ourselves from the center and place the only worthy substance at the center of all the affairs of the church, and that being the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If any authority or power ought to be observed in the church, it better be utilized solely for the sake of contending for the gospel. The only contending in this life that is worthy of our attention is when we ourselves are contending for the gospel.

That is a fight worth fighting every time. Wolves will come. They will. Flatterers will come.

[35 : 54] Crackpots and cranks will come. Shouldn't surprise us. But whatever may come, let us not be so futile of undermining those worthy of your oversight.

The church is called to be anchored in the gospel as individuals to its message and all the motives derived therefrom. Maybe you're not a Christian today.

This very message of grace that Paul was contending to the synagogue in Thessalonica that he suffered for in Philippi. Paul was surely not doing it for his health.

Not many people sign up for ministry to lower their blood pressure. And nor have I. I'm here to contend the gospel to you.

To surrender your life to Jesus Christ. Fully surrender. He doesn't just ask for maybe 99% of it.

[37 : 02] He asks for a full commitment surrender. And it comes just through your faith. To come to him. To say, Jesus, there's something about this. That the world is promising that if I do this or if I have this that I will endure and I'll be happier in life.

But I've been through that. There's nothing in this world that can compare to the joy that these people within Youngstown Metro have and resound. If that's you, I ask you to just come in faith to Jesus Christ.

Trust him as your Lord and Savior. And might we all be encouraged and anchored in an attitude of endurance as it is a sung reminder in a simple chorus by Matt Boswell.

It goes, Christ, the sure and steady anchor in the fury of the storm. When the winds of doubt blow through me and my sails have all been torn in the suffering, in the sorrow.

When my sinking hopes are few, I will hold fast to the anchor. It shall never be removed. May we, too, not be moved when the tides weigh against us, whether they are against us or our leaders.

[38 : 25] This church is strong to endure. Let's pray. Know that it tempts me to the fire for us, and pray.