

Practice what you Preach

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Jamie and Fiona. Good evening, everyone. Delighted to have you with us. I know there are a few visitors here this evening. You're very, very welcome at our evening service. We continue tonight looking at the first letter of Paul to Thessalonians, this young church which Paul had established, which he had had to leave quite suddenly, and which had given him such joy as he thought about how his reputation had spread throughout the world, and yet which he had some concerns about that he will deal with later in the letter. We're going to be looking at the most of chapter two, the first three quarters or so of chapter two this evening. So if you have a Bible you might like to turn to it, I'm sure John will put the words on the screen. We're using the New International Version, 1 Thessalonians chapter two, reading from verse one. You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. 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. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. 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. You know we never use flattery.

Nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed. God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, nor from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you like a mother caring for her little children.

We love you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely remember, brothers, our toil and hardship. We worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous, and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. And we also thank God continually, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is the word of God, which is at work in you who believe. For you brothers became imitators of God's churches in

Judea, which are in Christ Jesus. You suffered from your own country in the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and also drove us out.

They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles, so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit.

[3 : 1 0] The wrath of God has come upon them at last. I'm sure God will bless us as we consider together this passage this evening. One of the most significant events, I guess, for Christians over this year has been the death of Dr. Billy Graham. Dr. Graham was a very good age, but very sad, his passing away. When you looked at the obituaries for Dr. Graham that appeared, most of them talked about how many countries he preached in, how many millions of people had listened to him at his crusades, but they also, almost without exception, talked about Dr. Graham's character.

So this I copied down from Martin Bashir, who did the report in BBC News, and he said about Dr. Graham, it was the simplicity of his message and the sincerity of his life that will be his legacy.

What a great tribute on national television to a preacher of the gospel. He kept his message simple so that people could understand the gospel, and he lived his life in a way that was consistent with it.

He was utterly sincere. There was no hint of any scandal about him. Dr. Graham himself spoke on a similar theme. He said, what our young people want to see in their elders is integrity, honesty, truthfulness, and faith. What they hate most of all is hypocrisy and phoniness. I don't think that's just true of young people either. As people look at Christians, as they look at the church, the church leaders and church members, what they want to see in us is people of integrity, people who are open with their lives and who are seeking to do what is right by God's grace, and are trying to put aside hypocrisy and phoniness. And that's what Paul's dealing with in this passage from Thessalonians we're looking at this evening. He is mounting, as he does in a number of epistles, a defence of his ministry in the gospel. Now we don't know exactly what the circumstances here are. When Paul wrote to Corinth, for instance, we know there were people in the church who were trying to put him down and to suggest he wasn't as good as they thought he should be. There's no real evidence that that was the case in Thessalonica. More likely, the Jews who were the instigators of the original trouble that made

Paul have to leave Thessalonica, more likely they were putting about rumours about him and about his life. And Paul decides at the start of his letter to Thessalonians, before he goes on to give them instruction, and in some cases to rebuke them, he needs to put this straight. He needs to present his credentials and say, I am what I preach. You're not getting one thing in what I say and another thing in what I do. My lifestyle is consistent with my message. How important that is for us as well, that we are people of integrity and our lifestyle is consistent with our message. Well, we're not going to save anyone by our lifestyle. That can only be done through the grace of God and through the work of the gospel. We can easily put people off Christian faith if our lives are not right. If they look at us and say, these people, they're hypocrites, they're not practising what they preach, then we have lost the right in their eyes to preach to them at all. Why should they believe what we say if it's not reflected in what we do? So what Paul is saying to us this evening, as he defends himself, is also important in our lives and is relevant to us today. So the passage we have this evening divides broadly into two.

[7 : 02] There's quite a long section up to verse 12, where Paul is talking about himself. And then from verse 13 to verse 16, he's talking more about the Thessalonians and about their faith. We'll probably spend most of the time in the first long section, and we'll talk more briefly at the end about the last section.

So what Paul is saying to the Thessalonians is that he is a faithful teacher. As he teaches, he lives out in his life. And he uses certainly two and possibly three analogies from family life to help explain this. I say possibly three, you can judge for yourself whether I've interpreted the third one right, but he certainly talks about mothers and about fathers. And in the opening verses, I suggest Paul's talking about himself as a steward. Now, I suspect most of us don't have stewards in our families. Unless you are royalty or something, that wouldn't be something that you get in our time today. But if you were in a first century family, and it was reasonably well to do, and had a number of servants or slaves, one of them would probably be the steward. And in many ways, the steward was the most important and the most trusted of all the servants in the family.

The steward was the one to whom the master entrusted the running of the household and the things that were really important to him. It was very important that you got a steward who was, as I said, very conscientious, who was honest, who was trustworthy, and who was someone you could rely on and who wouldn't get things wrong. So why am I suggesting that Paul might be thinking of himself as a steward? Well, it comes in verse four, where Paul says, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. Entrusted with the gospel. And in the family of God, in the Christian church, the gospel is the thing which must be God right and which must be preserved. And the work of Paul is the work of a steward in God's household to preserve and to make sure that the thing that is most important is not lost or neglected. Paul is the conscientious servant of Christ who is seeking to preserve the gospel and to preach it to others. And three things that Paul brings before us that mark him out as a conscientious steward. So in the first couple of verses, Paul says that he was unafraid. Now, Paul went to Thessalonica from Philippi. And the story of Paul's time in Philippi is fairly well known, how he ended up being beaten and thrown into jail. Then there was this miracle in the middle of night, the earthquake, everyone was freed. And eventually the jail and his family came to trust in the Lord Jesus. But in Philippi, Paul had experienced really strong opposition. He'd experienced beating. He had experienced imprisonment. And you might have thought, well, the next place he goes, he'll be a bit more cautious. Having been beaten up and imprisoned in one place, why would he go and risk the same thing in the next place? But Paul says, no, that wasn't my thinking. Having been at

Philippi and having suffered everything there, I decided I dared to go and to preach the gospel and to do it without any fear, without any desire to water it down, to do it conscientiously and to present the full gospel message. And again, in Thessalonica, there was opposition, not quite as bad in some ways as in Philippi, but there was opposition. But Paul said, I've been entrusted with the gospel message as a steward and come what may, I'm going to preach it. I'm not going to be afraid to tell others the truth of the Lord Jesus. I was very challenged this morning, and I hope others were too, by what Alistair had to say as we were looking at Joel. And how often do I draw back from talking to others about the gospel, and in particular about the great danger they're in if they don't trust in the Lord Jesus?

I'm sure we all have that experience. Some undoubtedly are better at talking to others about the gospel than others. But yet, all of us probably have that experience, where we are afraid of men, or afraid of the action that may come if we present the gospel message. Paul says, that's not me having been persecuted in one place. I went to the next place. I wasn't afraid. I didn't change my message. I preached the gospel that God had given to me. And we need in our lives not to be afraid of men or of the consequences of speaking the truth. We need to do it in love and with gentleness, but we need to make sure that we don't dilute the message of the Lord Jesus. Paul was unafraid. Second thing I was stressed with Paul as the steward was that he was unblemished. In other words, there was no charge that anyone could hold against him that would say, you have done this from a wrong motive, or to get personal gain for yourself or for some kind of impure idea of things. So in verse 3 and 4, Paul talks about that.

[12 : 30] He says, the appeal we make does not spring from error. We're not preaching lies. Or from impure motives, that we want some kind of gain for ourselves. The impure motives may be sexual, but not necessarily so in this verse. And we're also not trying to trick you. The gospel is in some kind of confidence trick to get you to trust in something that actually has no substance. Paul said, as the steward of the gospel, as the one who has been trusted with the gospel by the Lord Jesus, I presented it clearly and faithfully, and I didn't do it from any kind of wrong motive. There's nothing you can look at in my life as I was among you in Thessalonica and say that drags down the gospel. That means the gospel is not believable because of something in Paul's life. He was unblemished. And a similar kind of theme in the other verses, we can say he was unconceited. So this is from the end of verse 4 onwards. We're not trying to praise God, but men who test our hearts. We know we never used platterly, nor did people on mass to cover up greed. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. In the ancient world, there were a lot of itinerant preachers, not gospel preachers, just people who went around peddling some form of religion or a superstition. And one of the things they were trying to do was to build themselves up to get people to think how wonderful they were, and very often to get a lot of money out of it as well. So you kind of con people into believing what you have to say. They think you're wonderful, and they keep praises on you, and you probably get some kind of financial and perhaps other gain as well. Paul says, that's not where I was. I wasn't coming with a message that people wanted to hear a nice, simple, easy message that didn't really challenge you at all. I didn't come to build myself up. Rather, I came to preach the gospel and to build God up and to please him only. Again, very important for us that our lives are unblemished and our motives in serving the Lord are not self-serving. That we're not trying to get favour from men or to have people look at me and say, how wonderful you are because you do this or because you do that. But rather, we're trying to win the praise of God as good and faithful servants, and we're trying to bring glory to God as we serve him and as we seek to bring others to know the Lord Jesus. Paul was a conscientious steward. He was unafraid to preach the truth.

He had a life that was unblemished. He was unconceited. He wasn't in it for his own good. So that's about Paul's character and about his preaching of the gospel. He then moves on the following verses to compare himself to a caring mother. So this is from the second half of verse 6 onwards. As apostles of Christ, we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you like a mother caring for her little children. We were gentle. The picture here perhaps is of a nursing mother, of a mother who's got her baby to her breast, is sharing the milk with her, is giving the baby love and concern, and is being really, really gentle and making sure it doesn't get hurt in any way. Babies, young children are so helpless and so dependent on others, and it is vital that they have those who are caring for them who are really gentle with them and to have their best interests at heart. And Paul says, when I came to you, I wasn't one to be a burden to put lots of things on you. I was like a nursing mother just caring for you and nurturing you as babies in the faith and those who had only recently come to know the Lord Jesus.

He also said that he was genuine. So this is moving on to verse 8. Paul says, we loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.

It would be very easy in a gospel context to preach the word, to preach it perhaps faithfully and powerfully, but then just to kind of leave it behind. So people get the message, but actually they get nothing of you. And Paul says, I was not like that. You could look at my life as I came among you and I shared my life with you. I was open with you. I was someone who's approachable to you.

And you could see through that that I was genuine. As a mother, a good mother has to give so much for their child and to share so much of their life and to give up so many things for their child, to show how genuine they are. So says Paul, I was like that as well. I didn't just show the gospel at you and say, take it or leave it.

[18 : 00] I believe what I say. Rather, I got in among you and I cared for you and I showed how much I wanted you to grow in your faith and to become healthy babes in Christ and ultimately healthy adult Christians. And what I did among you was genuine. It was sharing myself with you.

And then finally, Paul says he was generous. So that's verse 9. Surely remember, brothers, our toil and hardship. We worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preach the gospel of Christ to you. Work night and day. Isn't that a picture of what so many mothers do? At the beck and call of their children all day and certainly when their babies all night as well. There to work hard and to do whatever is needed for the welfare of their baby or their young child. Well, Paul says, when I was with you, I worked hard. Now, Paul later in writing to Thessalonians is going to condemn those who don't work hard, those who are lazy and said, let's down tombs because the Lord is coming soon. And perhaps he's building up to that at this stage. But here he's saying, I worked hard. I toiled night and day. So when Paul was in Thessalonica, he wasn't just preaching the gospel. He wasn't just encouraging the young Christians. He was also pursuing his occupation as a tent maker and he was making sure that he was able to provide for himself. Perhaps the people in

Thessalonica weren't that wealthy and it would be quite a big burden on the young church to be able to support Paul. And he made sure that he didn't become that kind of burden to them. Perhaps also, as was the case in Corinth, Paul was very keen and eager to ensure that people didn't think he was in it for the money. I preach the gospel, you give me lots of money. No, he said, I came and I worked among you and I didn't take anything from you. I don't think we're to read into this anything about how Christian workers should be paid or not be paid. There are Christians who divide, side to devote their lives to studying God's word and to building up the church and to give all their time to that and who rightly are supported by the church financially. Equally, there are Christians who say, I want to pursue an occupation outside the church. In my spare time, I will give to God's service.

Both of them can do it well or badly. Both of them can do it in a way that is really sacrificial. And we need to appreciate both those who have taken the decision to devote themselves wholly to the gospel work and to serving in the church or in Christian organizations and those who do it alongside a secular occupation. So Paul's not saying one or the other is right or is better. In other places, he makes it clear that those who live for the gospel, those who devote their lives to the gospel should be supported by others. But for him, in this circumstance in Thessalonica, it was really important that he didn't become a burden on the church and that he was generous in giving his time and also in supporting himself financially. Paul came to the church of Thessalonica and he had the love of a mother for them. That compassion, that gentleness, that care that a good mother brings to her children and nurtures them and brings them up well and makes sure that they're provided for, makes many, many sacrifices for them. Part of his work as a faithful teacher of the Lord Jesus and of his people was to be like a caring mother.

And then as well as that, Paul says, I was like a concerned father. So in verse 11, he talks about, we know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children.

[22 : 22] Two things about how Paul was a concerned father. Few are all familiar with the phrase show and tell. It's when particularly young children, they go along to school and they take an object along and they stand in front of the class and they say, here's this pencil case I got when I was on holiday. Look, here's a picture in the front and I want to tell you about how I got it and what it means to me, that kind of thing.

Show and tell. Well, Paul says here, when I was with you as a concerned father, there was some show and there was some tell. So verse 10 is the show, not show in the bad sense, show in a good sense, demonstrating what he was like. He says, you are witnesses and so is God of how holy, righteous, and blameless. We were among you who believed. So this is parallel to what we looked at a bit earlier on when we're looking about the unblemished steward. Paul says, as I stood among you and I was a bit like a father to you, a father in the faith. So I gave a life that you could model your lives on because what I did was holy, righteous, and blameless. If you wanted to know what to be a good Christian means, then you could look at me. You remember last week, if you were here in chapter one,

Paul talked about the Thessalonians being imitators of Christ and of himself. He, as a father, demonstrated to them how they should live, what their life should look like. And if they wanted to know what a Christian values and priorities should be, Paul says, you can look at me and I can with a clear conscience say that I was holy, righteous, and blameless among you. What a great testimony to be able to have. I wonder how many of us could go to others and say, look at me, I am holy, righteous, and blameless in my dealings with you. I think many of us, to our shame, would have to say, well, I couldn't really say that. But Paul could, and all of us should be striving for that, that we, in front of others, in front of the church, particularly in front of younger Christians, and those perhaps who are weaker in their faith, we should model what it means to be a Christian devoted to the Lord Jesus and to be holy, righteous, and blameless. So that's the show.

And then Paul moves on to the tell. You know, verse 11, you know that we dealt with each year as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God who calls you into his kingdom and glory. The responsibility, Paul says here, of a father is not quite the same as responsibility of a mother. The mother does much more usually in the care and the upbringing of the children. But the father is called to be the leader and to be the one who is able to encourage, to comfort, and to urge. To help the children to grow up in a way where they understand what is right and what is wrong, where they're encouraged to live the best life that they can to fulfill their potential, and where necessary to give them a little bit of a prod to do things a bit better. Now again, many of us can look at ourselves as father and say, well, perhaps I don't model that as well as I really should. But Paul says, as a father in the faith, that is what I did among you. I encouraged, I comforted, I urged, and I reminded you that you have been called by God, and what really matters to you and to me now is God's kingdom and glory. It's not my glory, it's not my kingdom. God calls you into his kingdom and glory, and we need to exhort and encourage one another to build each other up in our faith. The work of the father, showing and telling.

One of the things that's really striking in these 12 verses that we've just looked at is that again and again, Paul says, you know. Verse 1, verse 2, verse 5, verse 11, verse 9, he says, surely remember. Verse 10, he says, you are witnesses. Paul talks to these Thessalonians and says, just think back. Think back to the time I was with you, and this isn't something you've heard about or something that's a bit of a rumor, as other people were putting about. Think back to the fact what you saw yourself, and what you saw was that I was someone who was totally committed to the message of the gospel, and I was also totally committed to you. I was showing you the love of a mother, I was showing you the concern of a father, I was seeking to build you up in your faith.

[27 : 34] As a real challenge here, I think particularly for those of us who are in positions of leadership in the church, but indeed for all of us, if we are slightly older children, older Christians, what kind of example do we give to others? What do people see when they look at my life?

Let's move on briefly and look at the remaining verses. So verses 13 to 16, they say Paul is moving the folks away from himself, and he's moving it on to the Thessalonians. In a sense, he's saying, here is the fruits of what my labor for the Lord has produced. I have been a faithful minister of the gospel, teaching you the truth, and you have been fruitful learners. You have learned the word of God, and you have applied it in your lives. Two things are important here. The first is that Paul talks about what the Thessalonians have believed. As they preached the word of God to these people, they heard it, and they said, this is not just someone giving their own opinions. This is not something that someone has made up. We recognize and we believe that this is the word of God, that this is the truth that comes from heaven. That word which can work in us, that gospel, which is the power of God, to salvation for all those who believe. And the Thessalonians, as they listened to Paul, and as they saw the witness, a testimony came through his life.

They came to that firm conviction. They believed the gospel. They believed that the words they were hearing were the words of God himself, and that they were words that could give eternal life.

Again, very important, as we, as Christians, talk to others, that we do it with that real conviction, that it is the word of God that we are bringing them, and that they can see through what we say, and through what we do, that the word that is coming to them is true, and is the means of salvation, if they will accept it, and believe it. The Thessalonians first, as they came to know the Lord Jesus, they came to that firm conviction, that belief that they were hearing the word of God.

And having heard the word, they were obedient. And their obedience, says Paul, resulted in persecution. And I'm sure one of the reasons why Paul is writing this letter is to encourage the believers in the persecution that they were facing. And to say to them in particular, this persecution you're facing actually is not different from the persecution that others are facing. If we're going through times of difficulty, times where perhaps our faith is under attack, particularly from others, it's very easy to think, well, this is something that's happening to me, and other people don't experience it, and perhaps don't understand it. Paul says to the Thessalonians, that's not the case.

[30 : 53] Anyone who is faithful in their presentation of the gospel, and in showing others the truths of the Lord Jesus, they are liable to face persecution in one form or another. And Paul says, actually, what's happened here is you're not just imitators of Jesus Christ, you're not just imitators of me.

In a sense, you're imitators also of the very first Christians back in Judea, who undoubtedly they would have heard about while Paul was there. They suffered in a similar way. Their fellow countrymen turned against them and persecuted them for their faith in the Lord Jesus. And Paul really gets quite excited, doesn't he, at this point, about the great injustice that has been suffered by the Christians in Judea. That these people who persecuted the Jewish Christians were also those who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets before them, and they were subject ultimately to the wrath of God.

Now, we need to be quite careful with these verses, how we apply them. I think there has been a temptation at times for people to apply them in a kind of anti-Semitic way. You see, the Jews all abandoned God, and they're all under God's wrath. I don't believe that's what Paul is saying here.

Some Jews definitely abandoned the faith, and first of all, got the Lord Jesus crucified, and then persecuted his church. But we don't, we can't generalize that to the nation.

Nevertheless, Paul says, those who do reject the gospel, there is the wrath of God that they have to put up with. And again, Alistair very clearly presented that to us this morning as we were thinking about Joel. But for us as Christians, if we come across times when we feel there's been some unfairness for us, some persecution, probably in a fairly mild sense, in this country, we can know that that will come partly because we have believed God's word and we have been obedient to it. And we can recognize that we are not alone and that in it other Christians are suffering probably far more than we are in many countries of the world, Christians suffering in dreadful ways.

[33 : 15] And we're only bringing about what the Lord Jesus has said in the upper room, in this world, you will have trouble, you will have persecution. But take heart, I have overcome the world.

So the Thessalonians were those who had heard the word, who had believed it, who had obeyed it, and who could take some heart in their persecution from the fact that they were not alone and that they were suffering for the sake of the Lord Jesus. Let's just bring things together as we close.

A few weeks ago, I did a DNA test. These kind of tests are quite widely advertised these days, where you basically spit into a test tube and send it off and you get the results back a few weeks later telling you who you are. Well, there were no surprises in terms of my ethnicity when the results came back.

What did surprise me, though, was I came back with a list of people who they believed were related to me. And one of them definitely was, they said, this person is your second cousin, and I happen to know who the person was, lives in New Zealand, in many ways quite a distant relative, who I don't have contact with, but they were right, and maybe they were right with some of the more distant ones as well.

That is the marvel of DNA. Bit of saliva in a test tube, and they can analyse it, and they can very precisely say who you are and who you are related to.

[34 : 45] And I guess in this passage, we're looking at the DNA of a Christian. That if we are a Christian, if we are a believer in the Lord Jesus, there will be certain things that characterise us.

And why is that? That is not because of all the efforts we make, although we do need to make effort, and Paul clearly has made a lot of effort in Thessalonica, and to be a faithful servant, and to live for Jesus.

We have that because our DNA is the DNA that God has given us as his children, and with his Spirit living in us.

And many of us, I think, will look at these verses and be quite daunted as we look at the standard that God is setting for us. Do I live up to that? Perhaps not.

Can I live up to that? Well, with the power of the Spirit, I can certainly become more and more of a family resemblance as part of the family of God, as a child of God, and as a co-heir with the Lord Jesus of all that God has promised to me.

[35 : 55] And I think if we know the Lord Jesus this evening, if our faith is in him as our Saviour, we can take this away, that we have his Spirit in us.

And the Spirit, part of his work, is to make us more like Jesus. To bring out of us the fruit of the Spirit that Paul writes about in Galatians, to be that guide and mentor that the Lord Jesus talks about in John's Gospel in the upper room, and to be enabled to live in the kind of way that we should.

We need to be people of integrity. We need to be people who model what we preach, and to have as far as we possibly can lives that are above reproach in the church and among those whom we would seek to bring the Gospel to.

But we don't do it in our own strength. We do it because we are part of God's family, and as part of God's family, we have the Holy Spirit. We have in our DNA what can enable us to live more and more like Jesus.

So let's take that away with us. Let's try, strive to live lives that are pleasing to God. Let's keep hold of the Gospel and be firmly convinced of its truth, of the change that they make in our lives and in the lives of others.

[37 : 22] And let's go trusting that through the Spirit, God will help us to live for him and to become daily more and more like his Son. Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for your word to us this evening. We thank you for the way that Paul could so firmly testify that he has been in Thessalonica. The life that he lived was consistent with the Gospel that he preached.

I could testify, too, that he didn't just come and preach and go. Rather, he came and he shared life with the church. He nurtured them and he helped them to understand what God's will for them was.

Help us to be people who hold on to the Gospel, hold on to your word, who treasure it, and who are faithful to it. But help us also to be people who are consistent in our lives and who daily seek to live and to serve the Lord Jesus.

That as men and women look at us, they may see something of the character of Christ in us and may be drawn to him and come to know him as their own Saviour and Lord.

[38 : 34] Thank you for this time we've had together. We thank you for your word. We commit ourselves to you now in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.