

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**1 Thes. 2:1-13, “Lives Worthy of God”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/5/2017**

My wife Sonja and I went to a concert last night in Portland.

We saw a married couple named Jeffrey Foucault and Kris Delmhorst play,  
and the venue was a place downtown called, “the Old Church.”

Since they were playing in a former church sanctuary,  
there were a few references to religion along the way.

Jeffrey said he played once at First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood, CA.

There was a 12 foot tall painting of Jesus

hanging right behind him as he played, and he thought to himself,

“That’s kind of how I went through life from the ages of 5 to 18.”

The point I took was that if we aren’t careful,

Jesus can go from a figure of tremendous compassion, healing, grace,  
and welcome and become instead an imposing presence

following us around warning of impending judgment.

With that in mind, let’s just start with the title for this sermon, shall we?

We have so much fear and anxiety in our spirituality

you basically can’t put a sermon title like this out there

without it pushing some of the subconscious buttons

that we all carry around with us,

and I don’t want anyone walking out of here

with a 12 foot tall painting of Jesus following them around.

“Lives worthy of God.” Comes straight out of verse 12,

where Paul concludes a paragraph with an encouragement

that the Thessalonians “live lives worthy of God,

who calls you into his kingdom and glory.”

Well, then...no pressure right? Just make sure your life is worthy

when compared a perfect and eternal being who made all there is

and sent Jesus to die on your behalf.

It *could* sound like that. But as always, we need to ask ourselves the question:

“Is that good news?” And the answer is obviously, “No.”

It’s not good news to be told, “You better live worthy enough

for all that God did for you, or your creator will be very disappointed.”  
That’s an impossible expectation that drives us to fear and worry.

On the other hand, we might be hearing good news  
if this is an outsized encouragement to pursue life with God to the fullest.  
And that’s exactly what I believe Paul is saying with this.

It’s like telling a kid in a race to run like lightning.  
Nobody’s going to give them grief when they fail  
to reach the actual speed of lightning.  
(By the way, that’s 220,000 miles per hour, or 320,000 feet per second.)

So, you see that it’s all in the approach, and the heart of the person  
who is saying it. “Get out there and live lives worthy of God!”  
It’s meant to be a lofty aspiration fueled by love  
and hope for a future that rests on the grace of God.

[Pause]

In the second chapter of this letter,  
Paul is interested in setting the record straight on some things.  
Specifically, he seems to be making the argument  
that he and Silas were living lives worthy of God  
while they were there among the church.

He talks about the suffering they endured in Philippi prior to their visit,  
about the deep character and integrity of their ministry,  
about how they worked tirelessly on behalf of the church.

When I read 12 verses in a row describing the character of past ministry experience  
that the original readers would have been well aware of, I have to wonder,  
“Why?”

We need to understand both what is being said in this passage  
as well as *why* it is being said. For the authors to go on at such length  
describing their prior ministry,  
there must have been something to clear up.

But what?

One possibility is that Paul didn't want his ministry  
to be confused with the work of travelling philosophers,  
who in those days would travel around from city to city,  
gathering crowds and speaking wise sounding words  
in order to make money and develop a reputation.

Another possibility, which I find a bit more convincing,  
is that there were people out there taking pot-shots at Paul's reputation,  
saying he was in it for the wrong reasons,  
saying he just wanted fame and fortune.  
And so the letter is written in part to push back on these (speculative) detractors.

One reason to think that Paul was defending his ministry  
from local opposition is because of what we learn from Luke in Acts 17.  
In this passage, the early ministry of Paul and his friends is described.

Luke writes that,

4Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas,  
as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent  
women.

5But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from  
the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to  
Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the  
crowd. 6But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some  
other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have  
caused trouble all over the world have now come here, 7and Jason has  
welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying  
that there is another king, one called Jesus." 8When they heard this, the  
crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil.

10As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea.

In the months and years that followed what kind of reputation do you think  
Paul's ministry would have developed outside the immediate  
community of faith?

It's not hard to imagine that things had declined, and pressure was being put  
on the believers there to deny their association with Paul and his gospel.

If that's true, then in chapter 2, we have not merely a fond recollection of the good old days, but an appeal for the church to remain loyal to Paul's ministry even in the face of detractors.

That's a challenge in our own day.

As a national church, we've gotten important (and we've faded in importance).  
As a whole, the church has gotten rich.

It has established massive, nation-wide and world-wide organizations.  
For centuries there have been segments of the church quite infatuated with how they look in the mirror, so to speak.  
Quite in tune with who they have on their list of admirers.  
Very much appealing to the desires of certain segments of society.  
Very much in bed with the political powers that be (from, say, the fourth century and onward).

More recently, you know there's this thing going around called #ME TOO.  
Victims of abuse from industries ranging from film to fashion to music to politics to restaurants.

But there is a Me Too in the church, as well. Abuse...in the church.  
The fact that people have been deeply hurt and scarred by people in places of power *within the church of Jesus Christ* is absolutely appalling and sickening.

The character of Paul's ministry would simply never have stood for people keeping secrets about abuse. And yet it happens.

The way forward is twofold:

- 1) Admit honestly and fully when there are legitimate critiques to be made.
- 2) Commit ourselves to being a place that is truly safe, truly hopeful, truly focused on abundant life with Christ.

I think this passage helps us do that.

With that in mind, let's take a look at some of the major characteristics of the ministry that Paul and Silas and Timothy had there in Thessalonica.  
The passage provides us with a powerful description of what early Christian discipleship was supposed to be about.

In vv. 1-3, we hear about how Paul's ministry focused on sharing the gospel in truth.

Far from being part of a get-rich-quick scheme, they suffered in Phillipi, and faced opposition to the gospel in Thessalonica.

They emphasize that their ministry came from pure motives.  
(Presumably, this was a point of emphasis for their detractors.)

To demonstrate the source of their motives, they move in vv. 4-6 to discuss the divine authority that accompanies their work.

Their mission and ministry hasn't simply been invented from thin air, or by self-appointment, but from God.

V. 4 states, "we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel."

As a result, their aim is not to impress human beings, but God.

As is sometimes said in Christian cliché,  
they performed for an audience of One.

They appeal to the Thessalonians own experience in all of this, saying,  
"You know..." how we behaved among you.

V. 6 is kind of humorous to me, because they say,  
"We were not looking for praise from any human being...  
*even though* as apostles of Christ  
we could have asserted our prerogatives."

Kind of like, "I'm not going to do it, but you know...  
it's nice to know that I could if I wanted to...but I won't."

It really is a tricky line that is being walked here.

They are navigating the space between genuine humility and service to God on the one hand, and also not wanting to be dismissed as inconsequential or peripheral to the continued development of the congregation's discipleship journey.

In vv. 7-8, there are two metaphors used right on top of each other that indicate an authentic, familial relationship that is being upheld.

The first says that (rather than asserting their prerogatives as apostles of Christ) "we were like young children among you."

Now – some of your bibles will use the adjective “gentle” here,  
but the older manuscripts actually use a term describing young children.

It almost calls to mind Jesus’ teaching that,  
“Anyone who does not come to me like a little child  
cannot enter the Kingdom of heaven.”

Imagine a group of full-grown men in ancient society  
commending themselves as being like children.  
It’s very unusual.

But then in the next sentence, Paul flips the metaphor around.  
He says, “Just as a nursing mother cares for her children,  
so we cared for you.”

So Paul and his friends go from being innocent children to being nursing mothers.  
They both received and offered motherly care.

To recap, what is the picture of authentic apostolic ministry  
that we have received so far?

It’s focused on sharing the gospel even in the face of suffering,  
with pure motives rather than flattery,  
seeking to please God rather than people,  
with authority that comes from God,  
and with the rich affection and caring that comes  
between women and children in a family.

In the last few verses, 9-12, Paul describes the reliable workmanship  
that marks their ministry among the Thessalonian church.

When I say workmanship, I mean ... they actually worked. For money.  
Apart from their ministry.  
Being an apostle was not (at least in Paul’s mind) a career path.  
It may have been a vocation, but it wasn’t a source  
of personal income.

And a few decades from now we may be back to those days.  
The idea of a church being able to afford a single full-time pastor  
who is dedicated to the church full-time  
may become more and more of a rarity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Is that a bad thing? Well, it would be a big change  
for both pastors and the churches they serve, but...  
Paul's ministry seemed to do okay, didn't it?  
It does, however, require a certain mindset and commitment to core values,  
which Paul is so persistent in describing.

Paul closes this paragraph with yet another family metaphor,  
this time with he and his friends in the position of father:  
"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  
(there's that phrase),  
who calls you into his kingdom and glory."

There it is, in plain sight – First Century ministry  
described by the Apostle Paul himself, in what is most likely  
the earliest piece of writing within the New Testament.

Here we are, sitting around in a sanctuary in 2017,  
reading this letter aloud and reflecting on it.

What would churches in our day look like  
if we took Paul's model of ministry as a guide?

The church has never been perfect at any time in history.  
There were no "golden years" free of scandal or concern.

At the same time, for all the faults of the church, the Holy Spirit  
has also *always* been at work leading people toward lives of  
redemption, fullness, vitality, healing, and restoration.

I want you to take a good look around this place, these people.  
I want you to think of our families, our children, and the children of this city.

There's no reason we can't be part of that movement of God's Spirit  
in our own time. There's no reason we can't  
(by God's grace and empowerment) live lives worthy of God!