



Let's Get Ready to Rapture

First Thessalonians 2:1-6

“Searchin’ Searchin’”

Downton Abbey on PBS is all the rage. One thing I enjoy about it is the inner workings of the household staff and their various roles and responsibilities.

Lord Grantham treats the estate as if it were something entrusted to him to manage for a time. He’s one in a long line of lords responsible for the estate. There were lords before him; hopefully, if he manages well, there will be lords after him.

In fact, one of the subplots was that he was too old fashioned, too closed-minded, and it led to the near demise of the estate due to his poor stewardship.

Sorry; I should have said, “Spoiler Alert!”

In our text, in verse four, Paul describes the Gospel as something that had been “entrusted” to he and his companions. From the particular word he chose, his readers would have understood that

he was comparing himself to a steward – the chief servant in a great household.

Elsewhere in the New Testaments we are told that all of us, as believers in Jesus Christ, are considered stewards. The Gospel, then, is a trust from The Lord entrusted not to one or a few but to every servant of The Lord. Since it has been entrusted to you, to us, we want to manage it well.

As we work through verses one through six you will be given some principles for good stewardship of the Gospel.

You're going to notice that most of these opening verses are stated negatively. They describe what Paul and his companions did not do. It seems that Paul was under personal attack in the Church at Thessalonica. Timothy, who had just returned from Thessalonica, reported that the opponents of the Gospel were circulating slanderous charges against Paul and the work he established.

Attack the messenger and you can undermine the message.

One of the reasons for writing this letter was to answer these attacks, and Paul did it by pointing to his faithful handling of the Gospel.

Normally Christians advise you, if attacked, to not defend yourself; let The Lord defend you. It always sounds like the most spiritual option; but you really need to be led by The Lord. In this case Paul was led to defend himself for the sake of the Gospel not being disparaged.

His defense, however, was to simply remind the Thessalonians what they already knew about his time with them. It was a soft defense. Other times, however, Paul had stronger words for enemies of the Gospel.

We can organize our thoughts around four words: Your manner, your message, your motives, and your methods.

Your manner:

1 Thessalonians 2:1 For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain.

1 Thessalonians 2:2 But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict.

“Suffered” and “spitefully treated at Philippi” was an understatement. “Suffered” refers to the physical suffering. Paul and Silas had been publicly flogged, then thrown into prison with their feet in stocks.

“Spitefully treated” means they were shamed: Arrested on a false charge, stripped of their clothes naked and beaten publicly, all without the due process of Roman law.

Coming to Thessalonica you might think they would be a little more cautious preaching the Gospel. Paul said they were not. Their “coming” was “not in vain,” meaning it was not empty or watered-down from fear. Instead they were “bold in our God to speak” the “Gospel of God.”

They were “bold” even though there was “much conflict.” There were no less external dangers in Thessalonica; in fact they were forced out of the city after only about three weeks of ministry.

Whenever you share the Gospel you run the risk of shame and/or suffering. How desperately, therefore, do we need the emboldening of God the Holy Spirit.

Your message:

1 Thessalonians 2:3 For our exhortation did not come from error...

“Exhortation” refers to the message of the missionaries. They were among nonbelievers urging them to repent and receive Jesus Christ as their Savior. They were offering them eternal life.

Their message “did not come from error.” The Gospel is the truth.

Paul’s attackers probably tried to lump him in with other traveling religious leaders and philosophers. His message was the truth; Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No one is saved by God except through His death and resurrection.

The message is “the Gospel of God,” meaning that it originates with God. It is His message; you are only the messenger.

You must be faithful to the message. The encouragement of Revelation 22:18 & 19 is appropriate: “If any man shall add [to the words of this Book], God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life...”

Your motives:

1 Thessalonians 2:3 For our exhortation did not come from error or uncleanness...

“Uncleanness” refers to Paul’s motives for bringing them the Gospel. For example: It could refer to impure physical motives. Most of the popular religions in the first century promoted and praised sexual immorality. Traveling “ministers” of these false religions taught that there was spiritual maturity in premarital and extramarital sex. Many of the temples were funded by the services of temple prostitutes. The so-called ministers themselves often convinced their female followers to have sex with them. It was easy to attack Paul in a similar way by saying his motives for preaching the Gospel were probably impure on some level.

He answered the attack by simply pointing out it was not true. He could point out it was not true only because it was not true! That sounds redundant, and it is. But it reminds you to have right motives so that when you are attacked you can honestly say “It’s not true!”

A Christian’s character is the whole capital he has for carrying on his business. In most other callings, a man may go on, no matter what his character is, provided his balance at the bank is on the right side; but a Christian who has lost his character has lost everything.

The missionary martyr Jim Elliot wrote in his journal:

In spiritual work, if nowhere else, the character of the worker decides the quality of his work. Shelley and Byron may be moral free-lancers and still write good poetry. Wagner may be

lecherous and still produce fine music, but it cannot be so in any work for God.

Paul could refer to his own character and manner of living for proof of what he was saying to the Thessalonians. Nine times over in this first epistle he says, “You know,” referring to the Thessalonians’ firsthand observation of Paul’s private as well as public life. Paul went to Thessalonica and lived a life that more than illustrated what he preached; it went beyond illustration to convincing proof. No wonder so much work in the Kingdom is shoddy; look at the moral character of the worker.

Your methods:

1 Thessalonians 2:3 For our exhortation did not come from error or uncleanness, nor was it in deceit.

1 Thessalonians 2:4 But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts.

1 Thessalonians 2:5 For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness – God is witness.

1 Thessalonians 2:6 Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.

Several words in these verses describe methods of ministry Paul did not use:

He did not use “deceit.” The word is used of trying to catch fish with a baited hook. In other words, Paul did not try to lure anyone to Jesus under false pretenses.

2. He did not use “flattering words.” I once read that a flatterer is someone who manipulates rather than communicates. It can also refer to a style of oratory that seeks to gain something from the hearers. Flattery is a form of lying and has no place in the Gospel.

3. He did not use “a cloak of covetousness.” Preaching the Gospel was not (and should never be) a means for getting rich!

4. He “did not seek glory from men.” He had no personal ambitions. He did not see the Gospel as a means to further his reputation or expand his influence as a minister. Paul was not building a religious empire or franchise.

Paul was an “apostle” with incredible spiritual authority. He “might have made demands,” but instead he conducted himself in a manner worthy of Jesus.

We read within these verses, “not as pleasing men, but God Who tests our hearts” (verse 4). Let’s talk about self-analysis.

“God... tests our hearts” has the idea that you present your heart to God for testing. “Tests” refers to both a constant and continuing process of testing.

There is a long tradition in the Bible of asking God to test your heart – to review your life and reveal what is there.

Psalm 139:23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties;

Psalm 139:24 And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.

Commenting on those verses, D.L. Moody said,

The great trouble is that people search themselves and do not ask God's aid. We want to ask God to come to us with His searching power, that our hearts may be bared.

I cannot conduct an adequate search of my own heart. I don't know myself as well as God knows me. I need Him to show me things – both good and not so good.

Yes, God can show me good things.

Jeremiah 17:10 I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give every man according to his ways, According to the fruit of his doings.

We sometimes default to thinking God only shows us more and more sin, but He can show us fruit, too. Maybe that's what you need tonight – for God to show you fruit that only He could have produced in your heart and life. To have Him renew the joy of His salvation.

How does God search my heart? There's very little about the mechanics of it, unless you want to go medieval and get mystical. All I can suggest is that you get alone with God and give Him consent to reveal things to you that He knows and sees but you don't. And some of those – maybe a lot of them – will be good.

Realize, too, that this is constant, meaning even when I'm not 'alone' with God, He can break into my reality to show me something.

Deuteronomy 8:2 And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to

humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.

This is more God testing me in the everyday – when my actions and reactions give away what is in my heart. My circumstances are like pop quizzes in school. That’s pretty concrete.

Then, too, you must have the awareness that you will one day stand alone before your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. There He will reveal and review your finished work as His steward. He will test it once and for all by fire, burning away that which is wood, hay and stubble to reveal what is precious.

Looking ahead to that glorious encounter should keep you on task as His steward.