

Let Love Labour

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[0 : 00] Now, if you can just keep your Bibles open in front of you to 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, there's also a sermon outline on your order of service, all that I hope will be helpful. So let's pray again.

Father, thanks again that you have given us your word and thank you for this book of 1 Thessalonians. We pray, Lord, that as you speak to us through this particular letter of Paul, we ask that you would be working in our hearts and in our minds that we might indeed want to do what you ask us to do, to have the attitude that you want us to have, to have the perspective that you want us to have.

So be at work through your Holy Spirit. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, every once in a while, one of you will come and find me to see me about something or other.

And it's not uncommon to have the conversation start this way. Pastor, sorry to disturb you. I know you're busy. And whenever I hear that, sometimes I can't help but feel a little guilty and also a little worried.

You see, I know that there are times where I can be very task-oriented. It's very easy for me to put all my focus on the task at hand, whether that's getting a sermon done or making sure meetings run smoothly and so on.

[1 : 19] And so when more than one person starts saying to me, I know you're busy, then I know I've probably fallen into the trap of becoming too task-oriented yet again.

Because usually when people say that, they must feel like they are trespassing on my time. And if they are feeling that way, that probably means that I'm subconsciously giving off this signal.

So, I have no time for you. Don't disturb me. Stay away. But that's terrible. Because in the end, ministry is about people.

It's not ultimately about delivering polished sermons or running a Sunday service. And as the late Eugene Peterson points out, it's possible to have a busy but ultimately empty ministry.

Sometimes we pastors get busy, he says, not so much because we are so committed, but because we are so vain. We want to appear important and significant.

[2 : 20] And what better way to show that than by becoming very busy. Look at my crowded schedule, we humble brag. Look at the heavy demands on my time.

That is evidence of my importance. And that way I can prove, if not to others, then at least to myself, that what I'm doing is so worthwhile.

And so what happens is, I can end up with a busy but empty ministry. One that doesn't truly help people or bring glory to God. And so how can we make sure that our ministry is not empty?

This is a question that is especially relevant for pastors, but it isn't a question just for pastors. This is a question for all of us, because if we are Christians, we are all in ministry.

Because ministry simply means service. And it can be so easy, to make the essence of our Christian service, just about dutiful attendance and the fulfilment of obligations.

[3 : 28] It can be so easy to get lost in useless activity. And so how can we avoid that? How can we recognise and exercise an authentic gospel ministry?

One that truly does help people and bring glory to God. Well, that's where today's passage comes in. For in today's passage, Paul is going to showcase a ministry that is not empty.

Take a look at verse 1. You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. And actually, what he literally says in the original Greek is this.

Our visit to you was not empty. And so that's what Paul wants to show us. Now, Paul has already given us some evidence of this. After all, we saw last week that his ministry was definitely not empty of impact.

When Paul came with the gospel, people were utterly transformed. They were powerfully converted, turning from idols to God, living with Holy Spirit-infused joy even amidst adversity. [4 : 41] They had a faith that worked, which they lived out publicly in Mediterranean society. Everyone knew about them, believer and unbeliever alike.

And so that's why Paul's visit was not without results, as the NIV chooses to translate verse 1. But Paul's ministry was not empty as well in another way.

It was not empty of authenticity either. Rather, as you will see today, his ministry was the real deal. It was valid. It was credible. It was exemplary. You see what was going on in Thessalonica? A whispering campaign against Paul had gotten underway.

He's nothing but a con man, people were saying. One day, he's here preaching and teaching to you, and the next day, he's gone. Can you trust such people?

[5 : 41] After all, have you heard from him since he left? He was probably only ever interested in stuffing his pockets with your money. Those were the accusations that were circulating on their version of WhatsApp and Twitter at that time.

And that was significant because if the messenger was discredited, then so would the message. And so Paul had to show that his ministry was not empty of authenticity to protect the work of the gospel.

And that's why Paul appeals to the Thessalonian church's own memory of him. You know, he keeps saying throughout today's passage, what I'm like.

You know, verse 1, about my visit to you. You know, verse 5, how I conducted my business among you. Surely you remember, verse 9, how I work among you.

You know, verse 11, how we dealt with each of you. What I'm telling you is not theoretical. You know. You've experienced my ministry firsthand. You know what it was like.

[6 : 50] You know my ministry is not empty. Because when you look closely, Paul says, you will see three signs that my ministry was nothing less than the labor of love amongst you.

And so what are those three signs? Let's find out. Firstly, those who labor in love will speak the gospel willingly and boldly.

Now, remember what Paul's detractors were saying. Oh, he's nothing but a self-interested salesman trying to sell you his religious product. And Paul's response is to ask the Thessalonian church to remember the bigger picture, verse 2.

We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know. But with the help of our God, we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition.

Now, right before they headed to Thessalonica, Paul and his companions had been in Philippi, which is roughly as far from Thessalonica as Sri Aman is from Kuching. And from Acts chapter 16, we know ministry there is pretty rough.

[8 : 06] They had been seized, they had been stripped, they had been beaten, they had been denied a fair trial, they had been thrown into prison. They suffered physically and mentally having been humiliated publicly.

And yet, when the great earthquake struck and escape from prison was made possible, what did they do? They didn't leave at first opportunity.

Instead, they used that opportunity to tell their jailer about Jesus. And they didn't abandon the non-Christians around them. And then when they got out of jail, they made sure to meet with the Philippian believers before they left.

Now, this picture sure doesn't fit with the accusation that Paul was a mere profit-oriented salesman. And after their ordeals at Philippi, you wouldn't blame Paul and Silas for saying, hey, you know what, let's bypass Thessalonica, time for a holiday.

Let's put our feet up and head for the Mediterranean equivalent of the Batang Eye resort. But instead, they pressed on. They headed to Thessalonica where they got more of the same, more suffering, more humiliation.

[9 : 29] So why did they go then? because they love Jesus. And loving Jesus means loving people.

And loving people means wanting them to know Jesus. And so, they were more than willing to go love people who did not yet know Jesus. There was a deep willingness to suffer for the cause. Now, this is definitely not how someone who is only interested in ministry for the platform or for the status would act. Rather, these are the actions of someone who have been so impacted by Jesus

that they want to serve the true and living God.

This was someone who did what they did because something transformative, something supernatural had happened to them. For without a doubt, what Paul did required something supernatural.

And he acknowledges that. How is it that he dared to speak the gospel in Thessalonica despite strong opposition? It is with the help of our God, verse 2.

[10:47] You see, this boldness did not come from within Paul. He didn't try to will it into being. And it wasn't because Paul had a type A personality profile, you know, the kind who would rush in or guns blazing.

Elsewhere, Paul says he can be quite a timid person. No, this was only made possible by the power of God. And so what's the first sign a ministry is not empty?

It's when there is a willingness and a bonus to speak the gospel. Earlier this year, we had some missionaries, Lorenzo and Liliana come and share their ministry with us.

Earlier in their life, they had spent over a decade serving in a South American country as medical missionaries before returning back to their home. And you would have thought, well, that's it.

They fulfilled their obligation serving God. They're entitled to a good rest. But instead, this year, when both of them are in their 50s with grown-up children, they're not looking to retirement.

[12:03] Instead, in the midst of a pandemic, they're heading to a close country in Africa. In fact, they're already there. Once again, they have to learn a new language.

Once again, they have to adjust to a new environment. One in which Liliana would have to segregate herself from the opposite gender in many public places.

And one in which Lorenzo in the university that he's teaching will not have access to all the cutting-edge teaching tools that he's used to. Why would they subject themselves to that?

Because they love Jesus and they love people. Now, they'll be the first to insist to yield that they are ordinary people with no special talents.

But something extraordinary has happened in their lives. God has brought them to faith and so now they labor in love by his grace and with his energy to speak the gospel.

[13:11] And this isn't just for those who find their calling as cross-cultural missionaries. You see, so often we think that it is only non-Christians who need to hear the gospel.

But that's not true. Let's just have a quick look at some of Paul's other letters on the screen. Here is 1 Timothy chapter 1 verse 15. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst. And then he has 2 Timothy 1 verse 9 to 10. He has saved us and called us to a holy life not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.

This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time but has now been revealed through the appearing of our saviour Christ Jesus who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Now I think that you would agree with me in that in both those verse references we find a nice gospel summary. But who is Paul saying those words to in 1 and 2 Timothy?

[14:24] Is he saying them to non-Christians? No. He's speaking the gospel to Christians. Why?

Because they don't know it? No. That's not the reason why. No. The reason why he speaks the gospel is because Christians also need to be reminded of the gospel.

Because you and I, dare I say it, are unbelievers. Now you might be thinking, what on earth is pastor talking about?

If pastor is an unbeliever, what's he doing right now in the pulpit? and I've called myself a Christian for 25 years, come on, what do you mean I'm an unbeliever? Let me explain.

What I mean is this. Yes, many of us have put our faith in Jesus and we've been given new life, praise God. But when I say we are unbelievers, I mean that even as Christians, there are still times and places in our lives where we don't believe God will do what he says.

[15:40] Is that not right? We don't trust him. We find it difficult to accept that he really forgives and accepts us when we've messed up again. Or we find it hard to believe that he is truly sovereign over a complicated situation.

We fall into unbelief. And so an authentic gospel ministry is one where all of us are willing to remind each other about Jesus where we need reminding.

Ministry that is not empty is one where we dare to say to each other, you know brother, I can't imagine what you are going through in this hard situation.

But do you know Jesus does, he really does. Or perhaps we might say to someone else, you know, I was just wondering about the way that you behave to that other person.

Do you think Jesus would have been pleased with that? Authentic gospel ministry is a ministry that dares to speak up even if uncertain of the response.

[16:54] Now, that's probably a scary thing to do if we're not used to doing it. It might be a scary thing if we're on the receiving end. But you know what?

Such ministry is never empty when exercised in the power of the Holy Spirit. It will impact people because it's love in action.

Those who labor in love will speak the gospel willingly and boldly. Secondly, those who labor in love will have integrity.

In verse 3, Paul now says, consider again my ministry and notice its nature. Notice that I care about the content of my message.

Verse 3, the appeal we made does not spring from error. I didn't try to tell you something different to what the scriptures say, Paul de Claes.

[17:58] I didn't try to give you a Jesus who seems to have the exact same aspirations as a middle-class coaching knight or a Jesus who seems to have the exact same policies as those belonging to a particular political party.

I didn't try to give you a Jesus made in your image. I read a devotional by a popular Indonesian preacher recently.

He wrote, our relationship with God is the greatest means to be successful in life. And I thought the language was very revealing.

Notice that for this preacher, the end goal is success in life. And the wider context of the devotional suggests that he's thinking about worldly success here, job promotions and so on.

And the means to that end is our relationship with God. You see, our relationship with God is just a means to an end, the successful life.

[19:00] Now the message of this Indonesian preacher is quite appealing. Who doesn't want to have a successful life? But it springs from error.

because the scriptures never tell us that our relationship with God is just a means to an end. Paul's appeal to the Thessalonians after all is quite the opposite.

Turn from idols, flee from God's wrath, serve him, he declares. And that's not what everyone wants to hear. But Paul says, I'm just telling you what God says.

My ministry is authentic. And neither am I trying to trick you, Paul says. Why not? Because my motives are pure.

You know that. There's no flattery on my part, verse 5. The writer Warren Reesby says that a flatterer is a person who manipulates rather than communicates and can use either truth or lies to achieve his unholy purpose, which is to control your decisions for his own profit.

[20:15] But that's not me, Paul says. I never tried to get you to fatten my bank account. And verse 5 again, if you really need a character reference, then I can call on God himself as my witness.

He can testify that he's found me fit for service, which is why he entrusts me with the gospel. And so this is Paul's defense. He is saying, hey, no one gives their most cherished things to any random stranger.

Rather, they entrust them only to trustworthy people. And that is what God did by entrusting him with the treasure of the gospel.

But now, Paul says, as someone who has been entrusted with the gospel, I now take seriously my responsibility. My aim now is verse 4.

We are not trying to please people, but God who tests our hearts. For Paul says, God knows my heart and my motives, and he can assess them accurately.

[21:27] He will know the moment I start living for the praise of man, and the moment I start shaping my ministry to earn their praise rather than his. And he decrees that when that becomes the heartbeat of any ministry, it becomes empty because Jesus is no longer at the center.

So here's how you know your elder, or your small group leader, or your youth leader, or your Sunday school teacher, or even just your Christian peer have integrity.

They are committed to telling you what God wants you to hear, not what you want to hear. They are committed to making sure that the methods used don't undermine the message preached.

And they are committed to pleasing God. They delight to serve people, but they don't live to serve people above God. That's their motivation.

And how can we be that kind of elder, or leader, or peer? Well, the key to maintaining integrity is prioritizing consistency and sincerity.

[22 : 43] When no one is watching, are we willing to go with the decision that we know serves Jesus? The decision that we know shows our love for Jesus?

The decision that we know makes us more like Jesus? And when people are watching, are we still willing to go with the decision that we know serves Jesus, shows our love for Jesus, makes us more like Jesus?

Or do our actions become different before certain people to fit in with them? Now, seeking God's approval does not necessarily mean intentionally seeking man's disapproval.

There are times where you can please both God and people. But here is the test of whether our ministry is authentic or not. What happens when the two clash?

Will our desire for God's approval be strong enough? Strong enough to withstand people's expectations, people's disappointments, even people's anger?

[23 : 53] Will our knowledge that God tests our hearts keep us from wandering astray? And will that desire to be blameless before God be evident to other sincere Christians?

Those who labour in love will have integrity. Thirdly, those who labour in love will be like a mummy and a daddy.

In verse 6, Paul issues another piece of evidence. How do you know my ministry is authentic? He asks. Well, as an apostle, I could have asserted my authority.

I could have thrown around my wake. Perhaps I could have demanded some monetary support. Or perhaps I could have demanded some honour, some recognition, a VIP seat at the front of the church perhaps, or lofty title, anything that sets me apart as special.

But I didn't. Instead, Paul says in verse 9, I was more than ready not to be a burden on you guys and support myself instead.

[25 : 01] Or instead, verse 7, I didn't behave like a VIP, but like an infant, like young children, who in ancient society were not entitled to any honour at all.

I didn't throw around my wulik. Now, Paul says, what I wanted you to feel instead was not the wake of my demands, but the wake of my love.

And that's the burden of the remainder of this passage. Paul wants the Thessalonians to know what anchors his ministry to them and for them is love.

And to communicate that, Paul provides two key images. The first image is verse 7. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we care for you.

Have you ever seen a mummy with her young children? there is tender, loving care. When they bang their head on the table and need instant comfort, there is mummy ready to scoop them in her arms.

[26 : 19] When they're hungry and need milk, there is mummy ready to provide the necessary from her breasts. And of course, mummy does so, not because she happens to be a milk-producing machine, but because she has real affection for her children.

Well, that's the kind of ministry Paul exercise. As the Baptist preacher, C.A. Criswell, so aptly put it, he didn't feed on them, he fed them.

And there is not just tender loving care, but also total commitment and hard work. The other day, my youngest child sat at the lunch table when we were talking about going out in the afternoon.

I can stay home all by myself. And we said, without daddy and mummy, and then of course we laughed. And the reason we were amused is because we know that she can't.

She needs mummy at the very least. For the work of mummy never stops. She has to take care of her infant around the clock.

[27 : 30] They need her. She is feeding, changing, cleaning, cooking, and so on, all for the sake of her children. It is a real labour of love.

And that's how Paul served the Thessalonians. The second image is found in verses 11 and 12. 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.

What we have now is a picture of the involved father. So just imagine a child trying to cycle for the first time or play badminton for the first time or try to ride for the first time.

And there is daddy walking alongside him, holding his hand, trying to summon some confidence in the child that he can do it.

That is daddy encouraging. And when the child feels frustrated or upset or ready to give up, there is daddy again, this time consoling, speaking calming words to help the child regain a sense of equilibrium.

[28 : 52] That's comforting, and after encouraging and comforting, there is daddy urging. And that's when daddy in a mild but firm manner says, I am not going to hold your hand forever but you can do it.

You are becoming a big boy. And so daddy too is laboring in love. And that's what Paul is doing. As a mother, he acts as a safe space where people can rest and be fed.

And now as a father, he acts as a stream of encouragement, comforting and urging people to move forward in Christ, to live lives worthy of God, to grow into the kingdom citizens that they already are. God. And so these are the two images that lie at the heart of Paul's ministry. An authentic ministry, he insists, is nothing less than a labor of love.

And verse 8 sums it all up. Because we love you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well.

[30 : 15] Let that verse sink into you for a moment. Paul is saying that the ministry isn't just sharing of words, it's about the sharing of lives.

It's not just about the speaking of the gospel, it's about the giving of oneself. And that's what Paul did. He wasn't just reasoning with the Thessalonians in the synagogue, he went beyond that having meals, asking questions, making conversation.

And it wasn't all small talk, he went deep. He wasn't a distant relative, but a mummy and daddy to them. This, Paul says, is authentic ministry.

And that's challenging to us, isn't it? It's certainly very challenging to me. It's easier, as I said at the beginning, just to get busy with the work of doing admin or mere teaching.

And it feels risky. But that's the kind of ministry we must engage in if we don't want to come up empty, whether you are an elder or ministry leader or even simply an older peer.

[31 : 28] It's the kind of ministry that the church should be willing to accept from their ministry workers. people and it's why online church can never be anything more than just a diminished version of church.

You see, online church teaches us to think of our faith in consumeristic terms. Subconsciously, it teaches us that we can follow Jesus without being part of his family and trains us never to make sacrifices or inconvenience ourselves for the family of Christ.

It suggests that ministry can be done without the sharing of lives. After all, how can we share our lives if we're all hiding behind screens where we can lock off at a moment's notice?

But that is a lie from the world that we have bought into. Several years ago, there was a one-minute Facebook ad where a young woman is sitting with her family.

She's bored and so she pulls out her phone and locks onto Facebook. From there, we get a montage of a friend playing the drums, another friend dancing in the ballet, and yet another friend enjoying a day in the snow.

[32 : 46] And as she likes each photo, the music and the dancing and the snowing all come to life in a beautifully synchronized way, drowning out her family's monotone dialogue.

lock. It's a well-made ad, as you would expect. But what is the advertisement saying? It's telling us that the best and most authentic communities are those that we find online, those that we can customize according to our likings, rather than in the sharing of lives with those around us who are different to us in age and hobbies and so on.

But God says to us, don't buy into that lie because digital connection will never fulfill you completely. It will just leave you empty.

You know that, don't you, if you spend an hour scrolling through Instagram or TikTok or maybe watching videos on WhatsApp, it empties you.

It doesn't feel you. And I want something better for you, God says. And that's why I designed church not just as a place where people speak God's truth in Jesus Christ to each other, but as a place where people experience God's truth in face-to-face community.

[34 : 16] I want my people to exercise church not as a lonely crowd, but as a Spurgeon once said, as the dearest place on earth. But meaningful community cannot be rushed.

It can only be formed slowly. Sherry Tuckle, who is a professor of communications, says that it takes on average seven minutes for a conversation to really get going.

Before that, it's often a bit awkward, disjointed, even dull. But she says that it's necessary to have those awkward silences and stumbles, because that is when we show our real selves.

It's part of authentic communication. And the same dynamic is at work in church. As we share the gospel and our lives, we will sometimes be awkward around one another.

We will stumble around one another. We will hesitate around each other. We will sometimes be a bit disjointed. But that's okay, because that's part of sharing our real selves and our real lives.

[35 : 27] But that's the hard part, isn't it? The sharing of our real selves and our real lives. My friends, I think one of the biggest challenges our church faces is that we are inclined to very private lives.

We find it hard to commit to friendship that goes beyond the superficial, where we dare to talk even about the spiritual. And I think one big reason is because we're worried what people might do if we're vulnerable.

That's understandable. But what if we trusted Jesus with our hearts? What if we're willing to take risks relationally because we believe he'll take care of us?

What if we truly, really dare to believe his gospel of grace? If we believe his gospel of grace, then that will empower us to give each other grace and space to be awkward, disjointed, and stumbling.

If we believe his gospel of grace, that will help us to be more like verses four and five and six and seven because that's what Jesus was like. We'll be sincere, we want to please God, we won't throw our wake around, we won't be arrogant, we'll be warm and affectionate and gracious.

[36 : 51] And you know what? When those ingredients are in place, then real, authentic gospel ministry can happen because people will be more willing, I believe, to share their lives in that kind of space.

late last year, someone took a risk and came to see me to share a very personal and ongoing struggle in their life.

I felt very honoured by that. And according to this person, the reason they did so was because I felt safe. And I didn't have all the answers, but that kicked off a journey which meant I could walk alongside this person.

and actually this person could walk alongside me too. I was delighted to keep sharing the gospel with this person, a Christian, and providing encouragement to him to stick with Jesus.

But more than that, I was delighted to share life as well. And I long for that to happen more in our church, in our small groups, even in a pandemic, and perhaps, especially during a pandemic.

[38 : 10] A church where 1 Thessalonians 2 verse 8 happens, shared gospel plus shared lives. Not either or, but both and.

And so do we want a ministry that's not empty, but authentic? Do we want everything we do to make an impact? Or start by being committed to a life of integrity?

Aim to please God. And then, share our lives. And as we do so, be willing and bold with the help of our God to speak the gospel into lives.

And be like a mummy and daddy, caring, encouraging, urging. Let love labour. It's that mixture of habits that will result in a church worthy of an apostle's thanksgiving.

Why don't we pray for that now? Let's pray. Father, as we come to you, we are very thankful for the ministry of Paul, which, 2,000 years later, still ripples on into our lives.

[39 : 33] Father, we just pray, Lord, that as we consider his ministry, that we would wish to imitate him as he imitates the Lord Jesus Christ.

Help us, Lord, to be people who have received grace, who know that in you we are fully accepted, fully loved, and then let that grace spill out to others that we might love them, that they might become more like you.

So help us to be a church that does that. Help us to take risks. Perhaps you are speaking in particular to one or two of us among us today.

We pray that you would give them bonus to take the step that they need to take to obey you. So, Father, we just commit our church again into your hands.

We just ask, Lord, that you would slowly but surely grow us into a church where there is both gospel doctrine and gospel culture. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ.
[40 : 47] Amen.