

Accept the Word

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[0 : 00] We're in the middle of a series in 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, and so that's where we'll turn to in our Bibles, to chapter 2 verses 13 to 16. There's also a sermon outline as well on your order of service which might help you to follow along.

Let's pray. O Lord, this is your word for us today. May we receive it with joy and thanksgiving.

And we pray that your word indeed will be at work in us, convicting us of sin, building up your church, and filling up our hearts with love for our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

This we pray in his name and for his sake. Amen. How can we tell what is authentic and what isn't? It isn't always easy.

In 2012, the auction house Sotheby's sold an oil painting called Saint Jerome, attributed to a 16th century Italian painter called Pamigianino, for nearly a million US dollars.

[1 : 03] Even in its more minute details, it looked authentic. Apparently in paintings from that era, you can sometimes see very faint horizontal cracks, which look a little like brickwork.

And this painting had that too, which seemed to establish it as a genuine work from this painter. However, a few years later, after it was established that this painting had at one time come under dubious ownership, the auction house agreed to have this painting tested by a conservation science lab.

And so off the painting went, and within a few days, the answer came back. Yes, this painting was a fake. How did they know?

Because the lab discovered a certain pigment of green, one that only came about centuries after Pamigianino had died, and it was used in this painting, showing up consistently all over it.

It was a close call, but the test showed its true colours, quite literally. It was a fake. Last week, we saw that Paul was keen to establish the authenticity of his ministry.

[2 : 13] He ran it through several tests, making clear that it was the manner, the motive, the methodology, and the message of his ministry that all of it could pass the genuineness test.

His ministry was really the real deal. It wasn't fake. But in today's passage, he now turns his attention from his own ministry to the recipients of his ministry, the Thessalonian Church.

And he also wants to run them through some tests. But the main reason he wants to do so is not so much because he doubts them, but because he has complete confidence in them.

He believes they too are the real deal. And he wants them to have confidence in themselves. He understands that the Thessalonians, as a young church, might have been suffering from imposter syndrome.

As they look at themselves and their circumstances, they might have asked, Do we belong to God's kingdom? Are we really authentic Christians? Is our faith truly genuine?

[3 : 19] And so Paul wants to say to them, All right, guys, I want you to know that you have nothing to worry about. In fact, I'm so thankful for you. Because when I run you through the genuineness test, well, you guys will show your true colors.

And you guys will pass with flying colors. And today the Apostle Paul wants to do the same for us. You see, the fear the Thessalonians had is not unique.

Even today, many sincere followers of Jesus also suffer from imposter syndrome. We worry, do we belong to God's kingdom? Are we really authentic Christians?

Is our faith really genuine? What happens if I didn't have the experience that the other Christians seem to have? How can we tell? And Paul says, Let's find out.

Let this passage act as a test. And if we are truly followers of Jesus, then you will find that you have nothing to worry about. Because you will certainly pass the test.

[4 : 26] At the same time, however, it also means that the other side of the coin is also true. If we are not truly authentic Jesus followers, then this test will unsettle us.

It will open us up, expose us, and show us that we might actually be fake, despite appearances to the contrary.

And if that's true, then we better take remedial action. Because we are in danger. If today what we are suffering is not so much imposter syndrome, but presumption, then today's word from God is also what we need.

And so let's come now to the word of God and ask, how can we tell if we are authentic believers or not? And here is Paul's answer.

We know we are authentic believers when we accept the word of God as such. When we accept the word of God as such. That's what he says of the Thessalonian believers, verse 13.

[5 : 32] And we also thank God continually, because when you receive the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is.

The word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. You see, Paul had a word. But so what? Everyone had a word.

Everyone had a message. The Greco-Roman world of Paul's day were filled with all sorts of orators and public speakers who grazed the amphitheaters, the city halls, and the temples of their time.

You could probably throw a stone in any direction and hit somebody who was part of the Thessalonians' Toastmasters Club. Everyone had a word. On every kind of topic.

And if you're good, you probably could attract a huge following, gaining fame and fortune. And that's the kind of world we live in today, isn't it, as well.

[6 : 35] Everyone has a word. Whether on traditional media platforms or social media ones, whether it's the word on the street, or the word in the marketplace, there is no shortage of subjects where you can find a self-styled expert on.

Want to hear a hot take on vaccines or Bitcoin? Need to find some parenting tips for cranky babies? Or political commentary on the upcoming election?

Looking for new ideas in the musical or culinary world? Then just jump onto our friend Google, and he'll find the relevant word for you from the most prominent influencer of the day.

But of course, when everyone has a word, then the problem is we end up drowning in words. There may be ever-increasing information, but ever-decreasing wisdom.

Just having a word doesn't guarantee much. The 19th century American poet Henry David Toro once had telegraph lines laid near his home, and he sarcastically said, we are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas, but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.

[8 : 03] Or as he goes on to say, we're in a hurry to connect England with America, but the first piece of news that we'll probably hear is how some minor celebrity princess has a cough. Toro foresaw our 21st century world quite well, didn't he?

He knew that more information does not necessarily lead to more insightful discussion or healthier spiritual formation.

Quite the contrary, in fact. Words on their own don't guarantee much. And so Paul is at pains to distinguish the word he brings from the other mass of words that the Thessalonians were exposed to.

For what he is bringing to the Thessalonians is not just a word, but the word of God. What he's disclosing isn't human invention, but divine revelation.

Yes, Paul is the one speaking. Paul is the one commissioned to proclaim this word. This word didn't magically fall out of the sky or come hazily in a dream.

[9 : 15] There is a human agent involved. Indeed, the words he used are human words, not some unintelligible alien language that needs specialist code-breaking.

And yet, despite the human element involved, this word Paul is bringing is ultimately and finally the expression of God's mind and will, not merely Paul's own.

And as I speak to you right now, this word I am speaking, if it is a faithful representation and proclamation of the text before me, it's nothing less than the voice of God speaking to you right now.

Do you believe that? It is my words and yet not mine. It's a bit like forwarding an email. When I forward an email to someone, I'm the one doing the communicating.

I intend to do something by that act of communication. Encouraging perhaps if the forwarded message is encouraging or cautioning perhaps if the forwarded message is alerting you to something.

[10 : 35] And yet, at the same time, by forwarding the message, I'm enabling you to receive firsthand the words of the original sender.

And that's what we preachers do. We forward on the word of God. That's kind of what Paul is doing. After all, he simply proclaims what he receives.

He makes that clear in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 3 on the screen. He understood that as we encounter this word, the scriptures, we encounter the word made flesh, Jesus Christ.

We encounter his wise instruction, his gentle admonition, his gracious pardon, his declaration of freedom. When the word of God is faithfully spoken, God is speaking, teaching, promising, comforting, reassuring, reprimanding, and disciplining us.

In other words, God is relating to us. And so if the word of God is silence, or if it is replaced, or if it is distorted, and that means that God is not speaking, teaching, promising, comforting, reassuring, reprimanding, and disciplining us.

[12 : 21] And if that's not happening, then we, in effect, have no relationship with God. We are left adrift on our own in a world of misinformation, dependent only on our own limited perception, trying to gain wisdom that doesn't last beyond this moment.

That's why Paul moved from being a fire-breathing persecutor of the early church to becoming its finest expositor. Because he understood that this word of the gospel alone, mediated to us in the words of scripture, is the one word where people can hear directly from God himself.

And so that is what he will proclaim. That's what I aim to proclaim. Nothing else. And if the word of God really is the word of God, then it will remain so regardless of people's responses to it.

But, this is what has Paul rejoicing. When the Thessalonians heard this word from him, they not only received it, but accepted it as it really is.

Imagine your grandpa coming to you one day. he says to you, in our family, we take seriously the need together. Once every fortnight, we will have dinner together.

[13 : 57] Your mom, dad, you, your siblings, me, and grandma. That's how it was with my parents, and that's how it should be with you too when you have your own family.

And as you listen quietly, what has happened is that you've received a cherished family tradition from your grandpa.

But, what if, as a result, 20 years later, that is exactly what you're doing? What if you, your spouse, and your kids gather together every fortnight with your mom and dad, and possibly some siblings as well?

What if you turn down other commitments and invitations as much as possible so as not to miss this family dinner? What has happened is that you've not only received orally what your grandpa has passed on to you, but you've accepted this particular tradition and made it your own.

You've incorporated it into the daily rhythms of your lives. you've embraced it. And that's what it means not just to receive, but to accept the word of God as it really is.

[15 : 17] It's to accept it as definitive. It comes to define your lives. It has authority over you. During this time, we've come to accept certain SOPs as definitive.

If the SOP says that we can't have more than 100 people in this hall, then we accept it and allow it to define our current maximum capacity. We accept we may pay certain fines if we violate it.

And the word of God, even more than any SOP, is definitive. Why? Because God is definitive.

He literally defines your life. And you can never separate the word of God from the God of the word. If I wrote an email to you, you wouldn't say, oh, Brian's words emailed me.

No, you would say, Brian emailed me. Because I am not separate from my words. And it's the same with God. The word of God is not separate from the God of the word.

[16 : 31] And so is God definitive? Then his word should be definitive for your life. Is God authoritative? Then his word is authoritative. Is God non-defective in his being?

Then his word is non-defective too. And that's how you and I should receive the word of God. Because that's who the God of the word is.

And my brothers and sisters, when we embrace God's word as definitive and authoritative and non-defective, it becomes transformative.

Look at the Thessalonians. They heard they believed, they received, they accepted. And as a result, we saw two weeks ago in chapter 1, they turned from idols to serve the living God. It's why their faith was known everywhere. And it's why at the end of verse 13 today, Paul describes the word being at work in you who believe.

[17 : 41] Because my friends, the word of God is not to be separated from the God of the word. And is God living and active?

Then his word will be living and active too. It will be at work in you. It will lay dormant. And if you let it grow roots inside of you, well, sometimes it will poke you in places in places that will hurt, it will burrow deeper into your heart than you're comfortable with.

But when that happens, remember again, the word of God is not to be separated from the God of the word. And is God good?

His word will be good too. Is God trustworthy? His word is trustworthy too. Is God dependable?

Then his word will be dependable too. And so when this word is at work in us, making us uncomfortable sometimes, we have nothing to fear still because we are simply experiencing the outworking of God's goodness to us.

For he really is good. You see, sometimes we think receiving God's word is like receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. For one or two of us, we are suspicious of it, wondering whether its long-term effects are really beneficial or not.

[19 : 14] For many of us, we know it's necessary, but not exactly something we find pleasant or gratifying. I still remember what one of my friend's non-Christian sister once said to her.

Upon hearing that she was going to Bible study again, this sister said, still studying the same old book, not CNN. Always the same thing, right?

And if we think of the Bible like a science textbook whose contents are just facts to be memorised, then that might be true, that might be a valid criticism.

But when we grasp that the Bible is really water to a thirsty soul, food for the famished, when we understand that these are the articulations of love from a parent to his child, then it's a different story.

We'll sing like the psalmist. We'll sing Psalm 119 verse 45, I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts.

[20 : 20] Or Psalm 119 verses 92 and 93, if your law had not been my denied, I would have perished in my affliction, I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have preserved my life.

Or Psalm 119 verses 105, your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. When we embrace God's word, it works in us as a freedom bestowing, life preserving, path enlightening delight.

And so when Satan brings a word of accusation, we hear instead his word, no condemnation. When we struggle with sin and transgression, we hear instead his word, there's been a substitution.

Jesus' righteousness is mine. When we're facing a world of affliction, we can hear instead his word, waiting for you, is future glorification.

The word of God is freedom, it is life. it is light. And so here's a sure sign a church is an authentic church.

[21 : 35] It receives and accepts the word of God as it really is. It has an open Bible in its lap, not a closed Bible on the shelf. It has open ears, a ready mind, and a longing heart to hear God's word, not just from the pulpit, but also from one another.

It isn't content simply with soaring rhetoric, but as a desire to hide God's word in their hearts so that they might please God and not sin against him.

My brothers and sisters, shall we long for that to be a description of our church? I hope we say yes.

But you might ask, what habits can we cultivate to embrace God's word?

Well, for one, why not raise your expectations? When the word of God is proclaimed, don't just switch off, but ask God and come full of expectation that you would hear and know him as he really is.

Confess honestly to him if you're feeling indifferent to him at the moment and ask him to help you to warm your heart again. And then practice active listening.

[22 : 53] Just as you pay attention to a person's words when you actively listen, so pay attention to the words of scripture. Ask, what do I learn about God?

How does this passage help me to glimpse the beauty of Christ? How might the devil or the world try to persuade me that this truth isn't real or it isn't worth it?

And then take his word as definitive, not just suggestive. When you do that, slowly but surely, the way you live will change.

What evidence is there for this? Well, we need not look further than verses 14 to 16. You see, the Thessalonian believers didn't just accept God's word as such in a vacuum.

No, they reacted positively to it in the midst of very negative circumstances. Look at verse 14. For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus.

[24 : 03] You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews. And so this is what was happening. Judea, of course, was where the earliest churches were founded as the word of the gospel began to go forth from Jerusalem.

And these mainly Jewish churches began experiencing a backlash from their fellow countrymen, who were absolutely enraged that this controversial message about a crucified Jewish Messiah was beginning to spread and take hold.

And so if you wanted to calm these folks down, then the easiest way out was simply not to accept the word. But that's not what the Judean church did.

And that's not what the Thessalonian church did either. They imitated the Judean church. Like the Judean church, they were being persecuted by their fellow citizens, some of whom might be Jews, but many of whom were probably Gentiles, just like them.

But the Thessalonian church didn't take the easy way out. They continued to embrace God's word that imitated the Judean churches. How can we tell if we are authentic believers or not?

[25 : 26] Paul's answer has been when we accept God's word as such. But now he gives us a fuller answer when we accept God's word as such, even when others oppose it.

When we accept God's word as such, even when others oppose it. And that's how Paul knew the Thessalonians were the real deal. You see, what happens when we accept the word of God as it really is?

What happens when God's word is at work in us? we begin to adopt the thought patterns of God, the mannerisms of his son, Jesus.

It's a bit like immersing ourselves in a foreign language environment. 12 or 13 years ago, I spent two weeks on a mission trip to China.

Now, those of you who know me will know that I'm pretty much a banana. My Mandarin is strictly kindergarten level. But in Beijing, I found myself completely immersed in a Mandarin speaking environment.

[26 : 36] It's nothing like Malaysia. You wouldn't find a single English word anywhere. And I was quite surprised at how in the space of just two weeks, my Mandarin actually improved dramatically.

Now, the effect was only temporary, of course. As soon as I left China, it dropped back to the level it was before, sadly speaking. But the language was actually beginning to take hold of me.

And my friends who have learned a new language by immersing themselves in a different language environment tell me the same thing happens to them. One friend who lived in Germany for a year told me that after 12 months, he even began to think and dream in German.

And when we embrace God's word, we begin to think differently. We dream differently. We start going native. So to speak. We become more and more like a part of the kingdom whose language we are immersed in.

But because we are still living in enemy territory, so to speak, we are living in a kingdom opposed to God's kingdom, well, not everyone likes that. After all, what does the word of God say about us?

[27 : 51] For one thing, it tells us that if not for God's intervention, our hearts are naturally wicked and inclined towards evil. In a world which enthusiastically tells us to follow our hearts, that's not a welcome message.

And it tells us that apart from Jesus, there is no other way our world is going to become right again. In a world which prefers to fix our own problems in our own way, that's not a welcome message either.

And sometimes it might spark off a fierce reaction. Even if we are loving and gentle and nuanced in the way we communicate what God's word communicates, sometimes there will be fierce pushback.

That's how the word of God works. It sorts people into two camps, into those who accept it and those who reject it. But here is something surprising.

Sometimes the people who reject God's word most fiercely are those whom you think will be the ones most likely to embrace it. And that's the surprise of verses 14 and 15.

[29 : 12] You see, who was it who was waiting for the Messiah? The Jews! And yet, who was it who ended up killing the Messiah? It was also Jews.

Yes, this doesn't absorb the Romans of blame. It was Roman soldiers indeed who plunged the nails into Jesus' hands. But it couldn't have happened without the approval of Jewish leaders.

Now, it's important to note in passing that this is not an anti-Semitic statement because Paul is not claiming that all Jews are complicit. I mean, look at those faithful Judean churches. But simply referring to these Jewish opponents in particular.

But Paul is helping us see that whenever people reject God's word, there can be a fierce reaction. God's messengers can suffer and even get killed.

In Nehemiah chapter 9, for example, the history of Israel is being recounted. And again and again, Israel's rebellion is noted. And if you look at the screen, for example, you find verse 26.

[30 : 24] This is what it says, But they were disobedient and rebelled against you. They turned their backs on your laws. That's referring to the people of God. But notice what they then do next.

They killed your prophets who had warned them in order to turn them back to you. They committed awful blasphemies. In other words, when God's messengers brought God's people God's word and God's people didn't like it, they took it out on the messenger.

And they were willing even to take it out on God's ultimate messenger, the ultimate prophet, the Lord Jesus himself.

God's love. And so here we see the flip side of the coin. How do we know if we are not authentic believers? Well, when we reject the word of God.

It doesn't matter what our heritage is, whether we come from a distinguished line of believers.

These Jews had impeccable credentials. But when they came face to face with God's word, whether the incarnate word or the spoken word, they could not accept it.

[31 : 43] In fact, they opposed it. And that, verse 15 again, is displeasing to God. As is clear from Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees of his day, God hates it whenever the word of God is sidelined, twisted, avoided.

He hates it when the traditions of the day, whatever they are, take the place of the word of God. He hates it when the word of God is silenced, especially by those who call themselves his own people, simply because people don't like what is being spoken.

And perhaps the biggest reason he hates it is because whenever someone professes to be part of God's people, and yet rejects God's word, it is not only an act of hostility against him, but it is also an act of hostility against others.

Why? Well, the first half of verse 16 tells us because, notice, that means that they are trying to stop the gospel being preached.

people do not know Jesus the saviour. And that goes against every fibre of God's character.

[33 : 06] And so such persistent hostility will end with proactive punishment. Verse 16 again, in this way, they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

That's the warning for those who have chosen not to accept God's word. That's the warning we must take into account, especially if we call ourselves God's people.

And so today, some of us need to ask this question. Do I like calling myself a Christian simply because that's my cultural identity or my family history and yet I find myself disliking what the Bible actually has to say?

Then we need to be careful because we are treading on dangerous ground. For remember, how we treat God's word is how we treat him.

The word of God cannot be separated from the God of the word. But if you are someone who has embraced God's word, then there is nothing to worry about.

[34 : 21] For remember 1 verse 10, Jesus is coming to save his people from the coming wrath. And so if you receive and accepted this word of God, this promise of God as it really is, there is nothing to worry about.

You are not an imposter because the word made flesh has already declared you to be his. And so nothing can stop the word of God from working.

Paul was driven out from Philippi and Thessalonica and a dozen other places. And yet today, 2,000 years later, the word he spoke is still being spoken all over the world in all sorts of languages to all

sorts of people.

The question is, what will we do with it? Jesus once told a parable. There was a sower who sowed seed, the word of God, and some seed fell on the path, and the birds ate it all up.

That's Satan snatching away the word as we fail to take hold of it. Some seed fell on rocky places, without much soil, so even though it grew quickly when the sun came up, it quickly withered.

[35 : 44] That's the one Jesus says who hears the word, receives it with joy, but do not last as soon as persecution or troubles come. Some seed fell among thorns, which then choke the plants.

That's the one who hears, but the cares of the world soon make them unfruitful. They are not immersed in the word of God, not learning its language, its grammar, and so they never become a true native of the kingdom of God.

But some seed fell on good soil, and produced good fruit, thirty, sixty, a hundred times what was sown. This is the one who hears, receives, and accepts the word of God, and is utterly transformed.

My friends, which soil are you? Why not consider that in your own heart for about a minute? We'll take a moment of silence now for you to go and talk to God, and then we'll sing our final song as a prayer.

Thank you.