

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / Nov 7, 2021 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
Taking Your Next Step into Faithfulness Series
Faithful Heart in Ministry (1 Thessalonians 2:1-12)

Introduction: A story shows we have all experienced unfair judgments

Good morning. It's great to see you all and to start the new week worshipping God together! As we do, let's ask for His help in prayer...

Years ago, I'm listening to the radio, and the host talks about a time he's driving his car. He sees a bird ahead standing in the road. So he slows down a bit, assuming the bird will fly away as he gets closer, like they normally do. The bird does fly away at the last second, but that bird had been attracting another bird, and that second bird flew down on the road and got hit by the host's car.

His heart races as he looks in his rearview mirror and sees the bird writhing on the ground. It looks too injured to be rescued. He feels terrible and doesn't want it to suffer more. So he decides to put his car in reverse and run over the bird to put it out of its misery.

As he's finishing this difficult mercy killing, and feeling terrible, he notices a mom who's been walking down the street with her young daughter the whole time. And the mom shoots him the dirtiest look and clutches her daughter close, as if she's protecting her from this "monster" who threw his car in reverse just to kill a poor, already injured little bird.

Like that man, we've all experienced someone interpreting our actions or motives in an overly negative light. That other person unfairly judging us to be in the wrong when our hearts were actually in the right place.

Orienting to God's Word

Paul, an important leader in the early church, also experienced these unfair judgments at times and even false accusations as he ministered. This morning we'll see how Paul responded in one such case, that response revealing Paul's amazing heart. A heart with much to teach us, as we reflect on how our hearts are doing before God and with people this morning. It's all in the New Testament letter of 1 Thessalonians.

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to 1 Thessalonians, chapter 2, or you can follow along with the verses on the screen. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers and the little numbers are verse numbers.

So Paul and his small ministry team arrive in the city of Thessalonica and begin to build relationships, serve, and share the good news of Jesus. And many start life changing relationships with Jesus. But soon after that, the book of Acts chapter 17 describes how Paul and his companions are persecuted for their faith and are forced to leave Thessalonica.

As Paul and his team go on ministering in other cities, Paul sends someone back to see how the new Thessalonian Christians are doing. Paul finds out that they are progressing well in their faith but now they also are experiencing persecution and a smear campaign that casts doubt on Paul and his message about Jesus.

Back in Paul's day there were shady religious teachers and philosophers who traveled from city to city: giving speeches, gathering students, collecting tuition from them, and then skipping town. People in Thessalonica are now saying to the new Christians there, "You can't trust Paul's team. They're another group of religious charlatans looking to swindle you out of your money. And when trouble came, did you notice how they hurriedly left our city under the cover of night?"

So having heard this update and these accusations, Paul writes 1 Thessalonians to these young Christians in Thessalonica. Paul writes to rejoice in their faithfulness even in persecution and to help them keep growing in their faith, and to address these false accusations.

Here in chapter 2, Paul addresses the false accusations, and through Paul's response, his heart in ministry shines through, and it has much to teach us this morning about the kind of heart that pleases God and makes a huge impact.

Teaching: Paul's faithful heart in ministry

Perseveres in suffering – So let's get started looking at Paul's faithful heart in ministry in verse 1 of 1 Thessalonians chapter two. **(1-2)**

You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. ²We 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.

Amid the false accusations, Paul does not start here in chapter 2 by attacking back or getting all defensive. He starts by reminding the Thessalonians of what they saw and knew to be true. That's why Paul says to them "you know" in verse 1 and in verse 2 and will say "you know" or "you remember" three more times in this passage (*vs. 5, 9, 11*).

And what the Thessalonians know, when they step back from the persecution and from the falsehoods about Paul, is that Paul and his companions have a persevering heart in ministry. We see this in verse 2, where Paul reminds the Thessalonians about the outrageous treatment Paul endured in Philippi for sharing about Jesus.

There in Philippi, Paul and Silas were attacked by a mob, illegally stripped down and severely beaten with rods, and then imprisoned without trial. As verse 2 says, with God's help, even after that kind of opposition and suffering, Paul and his companions still dared to share the gospel with the Thessalonians.

So Paul has a persevering even in suffering kind of heart, the opposite of the false accusations saying Paul ministers for selfish gain. I don't know about you, but I have much to learn from Paul's persevering heart. Paul takes next steps into faithfulness in ministry God calls him to, even when the cost is great.

As we go through this passage, we're not only going to see Paul's heart in ministry, but also hints as to what's behind his amazing heart. And the good news is that all these hints apply to followers of Jesus today, they can help us to be more like Paul.

Verse 2 has one of those hints, as we see there Paul's active dependence on God. Paul needs God's help to have the courage to share the gospel in suffering, and so Paul daily depends on God's strength to keep saying, "It's worth it to pay the price for God and His gospel." This is not only the cry of Paul's heart, but also of persecuted Christians today, who we'll pray for next Sunday.

While we're not paying the price persecuted Christians do, having a faithful heart like Paul will cost us at times. You know that loving others deeply can be costly. But Christian author C.S. Lewis describes the costlier alternative, saying, "If you want to make sure of

keeping [your heart] intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal... Lock it up safe in the... coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”¹

Pure in motive – With God’s help, Paul’s heart is the opposite of the dead heart C.S. Lewis describes. Paul’s heart not only perseveres, but is pure in motive. So Paul can say in verse 3: **(3-5)**

³ For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. ⁴ On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. ⁵ You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness.

The false accusations say that Paul is a religious fraud, so Paul clarifies in verses 3 and 5 that there’s no error, impurity, deception, flattery, or greed in Paul’s gospel appeal.

On the contrary, as verse 4 says, Paul’s team has been entrusted by God with the gospel. Not only was Paul approved in the past by God for this ministry, but Paul continues to try to please God rather than people.

So here in verse 4 are more hints behind Paul’s heart that can help our hearts. Like Paul, we too have been entrusted and approved by God Himself as heralds of the good news of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and coming return. Think about that: entrusted and approved by God for such a vital mission.

So may we join Paul in seeking to please God rather than mere people, taking seriously that God also continuously examines our hearts, as the end of verse 4 says. In Paul’s case, as God examines, God is witness to the pure heart with which Paul’s team ministered, and which Paul further describes in verse 6. **(6-7a)**

⁶ We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. ⁷ Instead, we were like young children among you.

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/3058-to-love-at-all-is-to-be-vulnerable-love-anything> Accessed 11/5/21.

As apostles, commissioned by God, Paul's team has spiritual authority. And there are situations where exercising authority in godly ways is appropriate and good. But despite what the false accusers say, Paul's team never used their authority to serve themselves in a questionable way. As one commentary I read on 1 Thessalonians described it, rather than "throw their weight around" as apostles, Paul's team instead became like young children, "who have no weight to throw."

That commentary goes on to share about Henri Nouwen, a follower of Jesus who wrote many books on the spiritual life and led at L'Arche, where people with developmental disabilities live in community alongside of assistants. Writing about his experiences at L'Arche, Nouwen admits that when there was conflict, sometimes he wanted to throw his weight around as the leader. To, in Nouwen's own words, "clamp down and tell everyone to shut up, get in line, listen to me, and believe in what I say."

Nouwen goes on to write that this temptation to exert power like that is irresistible because "it offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems... easier to control people than to love people..."²

Now I felt some conviction in my parenting when I read the first part of that quote this week. The temptation to exert power is irresistible because "it offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love." I suppose after that convicting statement is a good a place as any in the message to start to ask us, myself included, "how's your heart this morning?"

Where you and I have power, whether as a parent with your children, or as a boss at work, or in a leadership position here or elsewhere, do we ever misuse our power as an easy substitute for the hard task of love?

The false accusers say that Paul and his team have the wrong kinds of hearts, that are impure, greedy, tricking, people pleasing, flattering, and praise seeking. Paul responds in verse 7 that he and his team instead became like "young children" among the Thessalonians, simple and innocent in their ministry motives and methods.

² *The Story of God Bible Commentary: 1 and 2 Thessalonians* by John Byron, p.68-70.

Parental in love – Ministering not only with a pure heart, but also with parental love, as Paul switches from young children to a related metaphor in the middle of verse 7. **(7b-8)**

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children,⁸ so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

So far Paul’s defense against the false accusations has focused mostly on inappropriate things his team did not do, but now Paul focuses on what they did in Thessalonica. Unlike the religious and philosopher frauds who take advantage of others, Paul instead has a parent-like heart for the Thessalonians, comparing his care for them to like a nursing mother caring for her babies.

Like a nursing mother with a child, there’s not only tender care, but also a deep desire for relationship. Look again at how verse 8 describes it, “Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

So for Paul, ministry includes more than sharing the gospel more and serving more and discipling more, as absolutely vital as those things are; ministry is also about delighting to share our lives together as well, as verse 8 says.

That’s why I encouraged us in a message in our last sermon series to

1st – not leave right after the service each week. To stick around so that we can fellowship with one another.

2nd – show up early, around 10:35, if you only come to second service, so that we can fellowship with one another.

Like families do, as Paul expresses his desire for relationship with the Thessalonians with a parent’s heart. And out of that parental heart of love, Paul was never seeking to greedily profit from the Thessalonians. In verse 9, Paul backs up that claim. **(9-10)**

⁹ Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, 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.

¹⁰ You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.

The New Testament book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 9 shows that Paul believes that apostles have the right to receive financial support from those they minister to. However, if

receiving financial support will hinder the gospel message, then Paul does not. For the gospel, which Paul has already mentioned four times in this passage, is so important that Paul doesn't want anything to get in the way of it. There's another hint to Paul's heart. As we, like Paul, see just how precious the gospel really is, it'll help us have the right kind of heart in ministry.

So while in Thessalonica, rather than risk any misunderstanding with the brand new Christians and the critics, Paul and his team work to support themselves, as we see in verse 9. So the false charge that Paul is in ministry for greedy gain holds no weight.

In fact all the false accusations hold no weight, as Paul reminds them in verse 10 of their holy, righteous, and blameless conduct that the Thessalonians themselves witnessed.

I wonder what would have happened to the Thessalonians faith if they instead witnessed something different. What if Paul really did minister with the wrong kind of heart: impure, greedy, tricking, people pleasing, flattering, and praise seeking?

I wonder if the Thessalonians, who were young in the faith and now also undergoing persecution, would have still kept their faith in Jesus, or instead been among the many who have tragically left the faith after suffering under church leadership with the wrong heart.

Thankfully, unlike the religious frauds of Paul's day, and of ours, Paul had a faithful heart in ministry. Paul wasn't perfect, but overall his conduct reinforced the truth of the gospel, rather than undermining it through a lack of integrity. So may we minister with a faithful heart so that we never encourage the stumbling of anyone through a lack of integrity.

Now verse 10 is the second time in the passage that Paul has brought forth God as a witness to his integrity. God described as a witness, like in a courtroom, no doubt relates to the theme of the false charges by the false accusers. But perhaps Paul's awareness of God witnessing Paul's ministry is another hint as to what inspired Paul's faithfulness.

As with Paul, God Himself witnesses all that we do. So may we stay God aware this week, looking to please our heavenly Father as He watches. Let's be more than just churchgoers with sound theology, let's please God with the right kind of hearts in it. Paul next reminds the Thessalonians of his parental heart in verse 11. It says: **(11-12)**

¹¹ For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, ¹² encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

As Paul closes his defense against the false accusations, in verse 11 he reminds the Thessalonians one more time about what they know. What they know is Paul's parental heart for them.

In verse 7 Paul is like a nursing mother and now he uses the metaphor of fatherly care. Fatherly encouraging, comforting, and urging so that the Thessalonians live lives worthy of their heavenly Father.

Jennifer Merton's father Joe recently went to be with his heavenly Father. At the memorial service last week, we heard wonderful testimony of what a good father Joe was to his kids. Then a woman who worked with Joe gave testimony up here to how she didn't have a father and how Joe was also a father to her. As that woman shared, she saw another lady listening who also experienced Joe's fatherly love in their workplace and said, "she knows what I'm talking about."

That experience of family that's not biological is what we're to experience in the church, having a familial heart for one another. Paul has been using all kinds of family descriptors in these verses: motherly care, sharing our lives together, brothers and sisters, and now fatherly care for children.

So in some stages of life and in some relationships, we may play a more parental role in the lives of others in the church, like Paul with the Thessalonians. In other relationships we might be more like a spiritual son or daughter to someone in our church family. With others we share more sibling, brother and sister kinds of relationships.

In all our relationships, may we have the kind of loving heart that Paul does. Caring for each other like family, because we are God's family. I'm so grateful for how this experience of family is already taking place here. And I want us all to experience the blessings as we together excel still more in being a family. It's going to take all our hearts, so how's your heart for your brothers and sisters this morning?

While this family heart is to start here in the church family, it doesn't end here. As God worked through Joe, perhaps He wants you to bring a parental heart to someone without

a father or mother in your workplace, or in the foster system. Who knows where God might lead you in having a heart for people?

Let's look back now at the end of verse 12 for a final hint to Paul's heart. As it says, our heavenly Father calls not only the Thessalonians, He calls you into His kingdom and glory. With such a glorious kingdom, ruled by a such glorious God coming, preparations are in order. And they certainly include seeking a faithful heart today.

Next Step & Lord's Supper

A heart, with God's help, that perseveres in suffering, is pure in motive, and parent-like in its love. May we join Paul in having this kind of faithful heart. That's our next step this morning, to have a faithful heart in ministry. That's our application.

A heart for others that reflects the kind of faithful heart that Jesus has for us. Persevering in suffering, pure in motive, parent-like in love, even when bearing the weight of all our sins on the cross, including every time we've failed to have a faithful heart.

We're going to take the Lord's Supper this morning as we reflect on Jesus' faithful heart for us. Because of God's heart for us, everyone is invited to the Lord's Supper. But you must respond to God's invitation by trusting that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead to make a place for you in at His table, as a member of His family.

All who have responded to God's invitation through faith in Jesus are welcome to eat the bread and drink the cup, here and at home, as the Deacons see if anyone needs a bread and cup and the Worship Team comes to lead us in song.

As we reflect on Jesus' faithful heart for us at the Lord's Supper, let's dare to ask God to show us where He wants us to have a more faithful heart as well.... **Song**

Bread – Jesus's faithful heart for us is so great that He gave His body to be broken for us. And this bread represents Christ's body, broken for us. Let's eat it with joy.

Cup – This cup represents Christ's blood, spilled for us, to pay the price for every time we failed to have a faithful heart. Let's drink it with joy. Thank you Jesus! Let's pray...

Dismissal – You're dismissed to know and serve God and people with a faithful heart.