

Pleasing God Not People

DAVE BAST

Here is a practical question for Christians: How can you tell if the speaker you are listening to or the writer you are reading is teaching the authentic Christian faith? After all, there are a lot of voices out there claiming to speak for the real thing, and it is not enough just to recite Bible verses. We well know, even the devil can quote the scriptures, as he did with Jesus in the wilderness; but, there are some characteristics of an authorized Gospel spokesperson, and the Apostle Paul talks about them in 1 Thessalonians Chapter 2. We will look at them today on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and if you are a regular with *Groundwork*, as Scott and I are, you know that we usually work in series; and today, Scott, we are continuing a new series that we have begun that is going to work our way straight through the letter of 1 Thessalonians—of Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We looked at 1 Thessalonians Chapter 1 in the first program; took a look a little bit about the form of the letter and Paul's initial greeting, and his thanksgiving for the Thessalonians. We also noted, Dave, that we think...scholars think...that this may be the first letter Paul wrote, or at least it is the *oldest* letter we have from Paul. It is one of his earliest letters that is in the New Testament.

DAVE BAST

Right; and what is remarkable in that sense is how much of the basic Christian faith is already there in outline form, as Paul writes 1 Thessalonians. So, just in the first chapter he mentions the Trinity; he mentions the resurrection of Jesus; he mentions Jesus' second coming; he focuses a lot on the Thessalonians. There was a lot to like in that church. He talks about their faith, hope, and love—the familiar triad of Christian virtues. He calls them a *sounding board* for the Gospel. So, they did not just receive the faith, as Paul shared the Gospel with them, but they sent it back out throughout Greece, so that Paul says: Everybody knows about you. I love that idea of a sounding board. Think of a violin. You know, if you just stretch a string taut and rub a piece of horsehair over it, you don't get very much, but if you create this beautiful wooden box that is hollow, and put the string over that, you get a violin, and the tone fills the orchestra hall. If you just pour the Christian faith into an individual, you will get something, but if you can pour it into a community that begins to love one another and begins to live out their faith, the sound of that...the sight of that...reverberates. So, that is how Paul speaks of them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he is very lavish in his praise for the Thessalonians; and indeed, right, their witness reverberated throughout the Mediterranean basin. In fact, in Chapter 1:8: The Word of the Lord has sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia; and we may not all be real familiar with the geography of that, but that is a fairly wide scope. In other words, other Christians were talking about the faith of the Thessalonians...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And were being encouraged by it, and their witness even helped lead others to the faith.

DAVE BAST

But actually, Paul didn't spend very much time in Thessalonica. The story of his ministry there is told in Acts Chapter 17, and maybe it is useful by way of background, if we just refresh ourselves what happened; because that is going to explain a lot of what Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians Chapter 2, which is our main focus today. So, here we read from Acts how Luke describes Paul's ministry. This is part of his second missionary journey, as we say, and he came to Thessalonica.

So, there was a Jewish synagogue there: ^{17:2}As was his custom, Paul went to the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days, he reasoned with them from the scriptures; ³explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said. ⁴Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks, and quite a few prominent women.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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." ⁸And when they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil; ⁹then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go. ¹⁰As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea.

So again, that is from Acts 17, that is not in 1 Thessalonians, but that is what happened when Paul planted the church in Thessalonica.

DAVE BAST

And it is a really vivid scene. You get a sense of just how this unfolded. So, Paul is there in the synagogue. He is reasoning from the Hebrew scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. He is showing them, no doubt, prophecies that pointed to the suffering one who was the Messiah; and they come, and there is a division of the house. So, some people believe him—some of the Jews respond and accept Jesus as the Messiah. A lot of the God-fearers, who would have been kind of hangers-on at the synagogue...interested in Israel's God, but not quite willing to become Jewish...a lot of them responded to the Gospel, and this happened again and again in Paul's ministry.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is why Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 2, starting at verse 13: And we also thank God continually, because when you received 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.

So, things started well, and a lot of people were gripped by the Gospel, and signed on, as it were.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and incidentally, that is a remarkable phrase that you just read from Chapter 2: You received what I said to you, Paul says, not just as human words, but as the very Word of God; which is kind of mind-blowing to think that a human being, whether an apostle or a pastor, or for that matter, any Christian, when they share the Good News about Jesus, it is God actually speaking through them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And some people accept it, but some people reject it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it reminds me of something Jesus said in Luke's Gospel at one point when he said: When you accept the Word about me, you accept me.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

My Word and myself are identical. So, it started out great, but it didn't keep going great because, as often happened, there were others who were opposed to Paul, who didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah; and so, what they do is they create a disturbance in the city. They actually appeal to Roman vanity and to the Roman cult of the Caesar by saying: Oh, they say there is another Caesar, Jesus. So, they are seditionists...they are guilty of treason. So, the Jews are actually...

DAVE BAST

Which, by the way, was not true. They are distorting the message.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but they are using politics to cover up their own religious objection that Jesus is not the Messiah. So, they have to leave and they have to flee from town.

DAVE BAST

So, this is the background behind the opening verses of 1 Thessalonians 2. So, let me just read those. Paul has gone on down the road, but he still cares about those Christians in Thessalonica; so, he writes this: ¹You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. (Yes, we have just seen that, haven't we—the power of God's Word. He goes on:) 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. ³For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. ⁴On 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. ⁵You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed. God is our witness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Paul sounds just a little defensive there. It sounds like he is responding to some criticisms that he has heard through the grapevine maybe were made about him in Thessalonica after he left. So, we will think a little bit about why he is defensive, and what he says in response; and we will take that up next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we have been looking at what happened in Thessalonica when Paul and Silas were there to plant a church and to proclaim the Gospel. So, we read from Acts 17. The people initially...a lot of them in the synagogue...believed in the Gospel message, that Jesus is Lord—that Jesus is

the Christ—the Messiah; but, some of the Jews who disagreed with them religiously stirred up trouble, and so, the Thessalonians, in the dead of night, said to Paul and Silas: For your own sake, you have got to leave town. But we just looked at those opening verses from 1 Thessalonians Chapter 2, our chapter for this program, and Paul sounds a little defensive.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is defending himself against something, which he must have gotten wind of.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the implication is that he was being criticized, and maybe they called him a coward because he left town in the middle of the night; and you can just imagine somebody saying: Yeah, Paul...you know...what a chicken. Just when things get rough and things begin to boil over, that is when he runs away. Which is absurd, if you know anything about the life and ministry of Paul, to call him a coward when he... There is a verse in Galatians—at the end of Galatians—that never fails to move me, where Paul says: Let no one trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of Jesus...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And I think he was speaking literally there of the scars...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The scars, yes.

DAVE BAST

And the wounds that he had suffered for the sake of the Gospel; so, no; he was no coward, but he does kind of begin negatively by saying: Look; this is not what I did when I was there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It reminds me of...and we did a series on this not long ago here on *Groundwork*...of 2 Corinthians, where similar charges were made against Paul. There were some people in Corinth who said: Oh, sure; when Paul writes a letter, he is all stern, but in person he is a wimp. This is not the only time that Paul... That may not have happened yet when Paul wrote this letter, but clearly, there were some people who saw Paul's fleeing the trouble in Thessalonica as a sign of cowardice, or just taking care of himself; and so, Paul says: No, that is not true. And the way he defends himself in part is: Remember what we were like when we were with you.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he can appeal to their own testimony on his behalf again and again. He says repeatedly: You know...you remember...you saw...the way he was; and it was not out of a sense of personal greed or vanity or seeking glory or seeking money for himself, or any of those things. He didn't do it for himself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, in more recent times, we have seen many scandals about televangelists; these ministers with their own TV programs, who take in a lot of money and so forth. Well, there must have been something like that in the ancient world, because often in Paul's letters he will say: Now remember: I earned my own keep; I worked as a tentmaker when I was in Corinth, or wherever it was...in Thessalonica. I am not in this for the money. There must have been some traveling preachers of some message or another who were in it for the money, because otherwise, Paul wouldn't be worried to be lumped together with them. So, he says: Look; I didn't do it for the money, I didn't do it for glory. We did it for God; and you remember, we preached to you.

And, he also then gets very, very personal in the middle of Chapter 2 here. Just listen to this imagery, starting around verse 7.

⁷Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you; ⁸because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you, not only the Gospel of God, but our lives as well. ⁹Surely 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.

DAVE BAST

¹⁰You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous, and blameless we were among you who believed; ¹¹for you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children; ¹²encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

That is a beautiful passage...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And at the heart of it are two amazing metaphors that Paul uses.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, parental; both mother and father. So, Paul is saying we are both mother and father to you because we loved you so much and we didn't want to be a burden to you. We just talked about that; clearly, he wants to stay away from being a huckster or somebody who is just in it for the money. So, he says: Just remember what we did. It was an incarnational ministry.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a great word; and that is a word that has come more to the fore, I think, in fairly recent years, about the nature of authentic ministry...what it should be. There is a wonderful phrase in here, too, where Paul says: We didn't just share the Gospel with you, we shared our very lives with you. It makes me think of an old story I heard years ago about a famous preacher, who was a great pulpiteer, and somebody was talking about him with a friend, and said: Yeah, well, he is a great preacher; and the friend replied: Yes, but he doesn't know the name of his own elders in his church.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

There is a kind of approach to ministry that is all intellectual; it is all about, you know, standing up there and preaching or teaching; but Paul says: Huh-uh; that is not how it was. I didn't just share the Gospel or the message with you—I didn't just preach to you, but I identified with you—I shared my whole life; and I identified in terms of both gentleness and love, like a mother...as you said, Scott; imagine a nursing mother...how she feels about that child at her breast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it doesn't get much more intimate, image wise, than that...

DAVE BAST

But also a father, he says, too; I mean, there is discipline there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But gentle and encouraging; and you know, Dave, at the top of the program, you mentioned, even today, how do we know what an authentic Christian leader looks like, as opposed to an authoritarian or a domineering person, or somebody who is only in it for the glory, or only in it for the money, or both? I think, just reading, you know, it has kind of taken the opposite of what Paul says of himself here. We can say that, you know, we should really watch out for leaders who are always domineering, always critical, always barking out orders...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Always seem a little angry, and use that anger and that edge to sort of cow people and make them tremble, and make them do what the leader wants. That is somebody to watch out for.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; I mean, there are certain so-called Christian leaders, we might say, who want to control every aspect of their followers' lives...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And that is the sign of a cult, not the sign of a healthy church. Somebody who is trying to push you around or tell you everything you can do...who you can and cannot associate with; that is not authentic at all, and that is not how Paul was.

You know, here is another thing. I mean, you alluded to this, Scott, and this should be obvious, but watch out for leaders who are living too high, you know? Who seem to be getting personally rich off their ministry, whether it is supplementary book sales or a television thing, or whatever it is; we are all called to humility, and you know, we follow a Lord who had no place to lay his head, as he once said; so, watch out for that, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, look for leaders who are humble, who are open to challenge themselves, and who faithfully preach the Word of God, which brings the presence of God into their lives.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, maybe at this point, you are thinking: Okay, that is interesting; that might even be useful as I read Christian books or watch Christian television; but what about me? I am not a preacher; I am not an apostle; I am not a missionary. Does this have anything to say to me personally; and we think the answer is yes. We will turn to that in a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this second program of a five-part series on Paul's letter to the Thessalonians; his first of two letters to the Thessalonians; and today, we have been in Chapter 2, where we have been seeing, Dave, that there was a lot of trouble stirred up in Thessalonica. Paul had to flee; and subsequently, he caught wind of some people who were deriding his character, so he has defended himself; he has defended his ministry; and so, he also says this in Chapter 2.

⁴We 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.

DAVE BAST

Beautiful phrase, and it strikes me as I read those words, that that applies to far more than just professionals or ministers or missionaries. Paul is speaking for all of us as followers of Jesus when he says: We have been approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel. God has entrusted the Gospel to everybody, not just to a few...a chosen few full-time, you know, ministers. He has done that because he approves of us. There is an authenticity to following this calling. We don't have to be sort of hesitant or wondering: Well, do I have the right to try to say something? No, God has entrusted you with this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; Jesus did a bold thing after his resurrection and when he ascended to heaven. He left the Church on earth in human hands, which are inevitably flawed. Peter had been known to have feet of clay, and everybody is flawed; but, Jesus knew that the Church would carry his Gospel forward; not always perfectly, but...and not only just the ministers, as you just said, Dave. So you are not a pastor, you are not a missionary, you are not an evangelist, but you are a Christian, which means you should be transparent to Jesus yourself, and you preach the Word in words and in deed, and in the shape of your life; so that, as John Calvin used to like to say in Latin: We live all of our lives *coram deo*, which meant before the face of God; and that is not just ministers, that is everybody.

DAVE BAST

Right; I think there is a beautiful thing to remember each day of our lives, that as we get up...I remember a prayer, a daily prayer I read once of John Stott, one of my heroes in the faith. He would pray every day as he began: Heavenly Father, I pray that *this* day I may live in your presence and please you more and more. What a great way to begin; to think that we are living with God in his presence, with his eye on us, and we want to please him. It is striking how Paul, not only appeals to the testimony of the Thessalonians: You can confirm this is what I did, this is how I was; I was authentic, I was incarnational; but he appeals to God: God is my witness, too. So, he lived with a sense of accountability to God, but also a sense of approval by God. God has done this; God has called me to do this; and he does the same thing for you and for me. He entrusts us with his Gospel, to live it out and to share it with our words, and in our actions; and we can be confident that when we do that, the word of our human lips becomes his Word, and people are changed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And probably a lot of us can think back and we can remember a time when maybe it was a parent or a grandparent...maybe it was a good friend, maybe it was a boss...somebody we worked for...a manager...who, at some point, entrusted us with something important. Dad trusts you now. You are old enough, son; you are old enough, daughter, to do this now; or the boss says: I am not going to check up on you...

DAVE BAST

Yes; right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You do this project. I trust you to do the right thing and to do it the right way. Well, that is a really good feeling. There is a sense in which you feel like you have kind of arrived, as a child or as a worker...

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is an honor, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and that is what God does with us. He trusts us with his Word, and he tests our hearts; so we just are faithful to him. You know, God will use us as he used Paul, but also as he has used ordinary Christian believers for the last two thousand years.

DAVE BAST

You know, I don't know about you, Scott, but for myself...and I have a hunch this is true of a lot of Christians...we have trouble believing that God actually approves of us. You know, I don't approve of me; and yes, I am sure he disapproves of some of the things we do. We do fall; we do fail; we do falter; but the basic Gospel message is that we are beloved in Christ. We are accepted in Christ. We are approved because of Christ. We have Christ's righteousness clothing us. So, God actually does put his stamp of approval on us and say: You know...no, you are not perfect yet. Someday you will be. I am working on that. You need to work on that; but, you are worthy of sharing my love with a needy world. You don't have to be perfect in order to do that; and I will be with you and I will see that your word carries weight, because it becomes my Word. I think that is wonderfully encouraging and affirming.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think so; and what do we receive? You know, we see this again and again in the New Testament, and I think theologians, again, like John Calvin and others have said: In faith, what do you receive? You received Christ clothed with the Gospel. So, you get Jesus, his person, and you get the Good News of the Gospel. That is what gets implanted into your heart by the work of the Holy Spirit; and it is out of the font of all that goodness and of all that richness that we then live our lives as transparent witnesses to Jesus Christ; and you know, as we often hear at funerals, and as you and I have probably said, Dave, as pastors at many funerals, when it is all said and done, we anticipate the blessing of our Lord when he says, "Well done, good and faithful servant." And there is nothing better than that.

DAVE BAST

Amen. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with us today on *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee. We hope you will join us again next time as we study Paul's advice for the Christian life found in 1 Thessalonians 3 and 4.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you; or tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

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