The Message and the Messenger
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

We're continuing our series in 1 Thessalonians: a letter written by the apostle Paul to a young church. Now when you read a letter, the context it was written in matters, doesn't it. Listen to this line, taken from a real letter written by a wife to her husband: first she describes his 'rough, sarcastic and overbearing manner' and then she says, 'you are not so kind as you used to be.'

Now, how do you interpret that? Is she nagging him? Is she ticking him off? Has she had enough of their loveless marriage and she's warning him that, unless things change, she's off? Well, in fact that letter was written by Clementine Churchill, to her husband Winston Churchill. And when she wrote it they had been married for 32 years, but were still very much in love. And it was written in June 1940, not long after Churchill had been appointed Prime Minister in the darkest days of the Second World War, and the weight of the world was on his shoulders. And in that letter she describes how the pressure he was under was making him more grumpy and irritable than normal, and his staff were suffering. But Clementine says how he had always had staff and colleagues who weren't just loyal and obedient to him, but who loved him. And to lead them where she knew he needed to lead them, he needed them to go on loving him, which they wouldn't if he carried on the way he was going. And so far from the letter being a nag, or a criticism, or a threat, it was an expression of her love for her husband. But to see that, you've got to know that war was its backdrop.

And to properly understand the passage we're going to look at now, you've also got to understand the backdrop, because the church Paul is writing to, whilst it wasn't born in the midst of war, was born in the midst of violet opposition. Opposition that culminated in a riot, that forced Paul and his team to flee Thessalonica by night.

And it's that context that helps explain why, as we're going to see, Paul goes out of his way to defend himself and his ministry.

Let's look at it together: **1 Thess 2:1-8**

The Problem with Preachers
Now this letter was written around 50AD, and at that time it was commonplace to have guys wandering around as travelling philosophers and religious teachers. And they'd go from town to town, draw a crowd, make a great impression, tell people what they wanted to hear, pass round the money bag, and then leg it out of town with people's hard earned cash, before they were found out as the frauds they were.

So the people of Thessalonica were used to these travelling preacher types who were only too happy to rip people off. And so when Paul defends his ministry here, it's almost certainly in response to just such criticism.

You see, imagine the negative publicity that would have been generated by his fleeing the city, under cover of darkness, in the aftermath of this riot. And those who have become Christians are probably facing the jibes of their own families or city authorities: 'Can't you see that this man is just like all the other religious hucksters who pass through here? Can't you see he's just in it for what he can get

out of it, that he's just using you, but the moment things start getting hot he drops you like a stone?'

And the truth is that if you can discredit the messenger, you can discredit the message, can't you? Whilst today's politicians might be able to get away with the line that 'my private life has nothing to do with my public job', the same cannot be said for religious teachers, can it? When what you're talking about is not whether to raise taxes or not, but the heart and the inner life, then the state of the preacher's heart and inner life does matter.

And the criticism that Paul faced was not restricted to his period was it? When I became a Christian aged about 16 my father was understandably dubious, and he told me that I should be very careful about who I listened to and what I believed, because there were frauds and charlatans aplenty out there.

And he had a point didn't he? Even up to today. A guy who campaigns publically from a Christian platform against immorality is found to have used the Ashley Maddison website. A high profile pastor solicits donations for a brand new private jet. A youth pastor is sacked for having had sex with a teen under his care. And tragically, the list could go on. And each one discredits and shames the message they were supposedly preaching. Because here, at least, the integrity of the messenger matters.

So, when Paul hears that this is the brush he's being painted with, he puts the record straight.

Authentic Ministry

Look at v1, 'For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain.' Or, as one translation puts it, 'was not a failure.' You see, when things are hard, and you're facing opposition, and things aren't going the way you wanted, whether at home or at work, you can think, 'what's the point?' And Paul has been on the receiving end of hostility, and now he's facing criticism, and the Thessalonian Christians are facing the same, and it would be easy to think 'is this worth it? Or is all this hardship in vain?' But when you're doing what God would have you do, however hard it is, it is never in vain, there is always a point – even if you can't see it in the moment.

But having said that, when Paul says his visit to them was not in vain, he probably isn't thinking about the results, and all the changed lives he's left behind in Thessalonica. Instead, he's probably talking about the character of his ministry among them. That it wasn't insincere, that it wasn't empty or shallow or vacuous. That this wasn't just another example of drive-by evangelism: put up your hand, come to the front, hand over your cash, then bye-bye.

Instead, he reminds them that it was on the back of having already suffered for the message he was preaching that he came to them in the first place. Verse 2: 'But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.' And what he's referring to is what happened at Philippi, his previous stop, where he had been arrested, and beaten, and publically

humiliated and imprisoned, and all despite the fact that he was a Roman citizen, which made it all unjust and illegal as well as humiliating and painful.

And yet, because this was a message that Paul and his team knew was true, that they believed in, and that others needed to hear, they picked themselves up, brushed themselves down, and started all over again in Thessalonica, regardless of the personal cost. And in saying that, Paul knows that he can call on the Thessalonians themselves to act as witnesses on his behalf: v1, 'You yourselves know, brothers…'; v2 and v5, '… as you know…'. So Paul knows, and they know, that he has nothing to hide. His ministry was not smoke and mirrors, he was not one thing in private and another in public. He wasn't a fraud. He wasn't a hypocrite. He wasn't just another religious huckster.

Now, in 1987, Richard Foster published a well-known book called 'Money, Sex and Power', which he called 'the three greatest temptations of our age'. But those three things weren't the greatest temptations just in the 80's, were they? I mean which of us today don't feel the pull of at least one of those? And to misuse money, or sex or power, or to seek your ultimate satisfaction in them, to think that to have them will make you, is just as a big a temptation now as it was in the 80s.

But if you listen to Paul, it's exactly against these kinds of temptations that Paul has to defend himself. That the pursuit of those things was not what was motivating his ministry.

Verse 3: 'For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive.' Verse 5, 'For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed.' Verse 6, 'Nor did we seek glory from people.' In other words, 'listen', Paul says, 'you know that when we came to tell you the gospel, the good news of all that Jesus has done for you through his death and resurrection, we weren't trying to get money off you, we weren't impure, we didn't try and sleep with any of you, we didn't manipulate you or lord it over you, or try and flatter you or promote ourselves at your expense. Neither money, nor sex nor power was our motive.'

Instead Paul tells them what was driving them: v4, 'But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.' Verse 7, 'But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.'

So, rather than flattering or pleasing people, Paul says they were motivated by this desire to please God. And as for preaching the gospel for their own gain, how much further from a huckster or a religious fraud can you get than a mother nursing her baby? And mums you know this: The sleepless nights, the hours pacing the floor, the exhaustion, all for the love of this baby who gives nothing in return. A nursing mother doesn't take, does she? A nursing mother literally pours out her life. She grows weak and tired and exhausted so that her child might thrive.

When I was a paediatrician, one of the most remarkable things I saw was the attitude of mums to their newborn babies. They'd gone through the pain and the exhaustion of delivery, and they'd had the trauma of their babies being whisked away to the neonatal unit, but when I'd go and see them and explain what was happening to their babies, one of the first things they'd ask was, 'Is there anything I can do? I want to do something for my baby, I want to help him (or her).' And our answer was always the same – 'you can start expressing some milk'. And that's what they'd do. So here is this little baby, who can't offer anything or do anything for it's mother, but the mother loves her and will do anything for her. Even that which causes her pain.

And Paul says, that's what marked our attitude to you. And it results in a very different kind of ministry, doesn't it? Rather than being in it for what you can get out of it, rather than using others for your own glory, or lining your pockets, Paul says in v8: 'So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves.' It result in a kind of ministry that doesn't just put words in the mouth, but your life on the line.

Now, what has this got to do with you? Well, if you're here this morning and you're not yet a Christian, I think it's this. And I know this runs counter to our cynical age, but really simply, you can trust the message of the New Testament writers like Paul. They had nothing to gain from making this up. In fact, in giving their lives to tell people about Jesus, they weren't trying to manipulate anyone, they weren't taking anyone's money, they weren't trying to flatter people, or build their own little kingdoms. The only explanation for their own lives being turned around, and their willingness to suffer and die for so outlandish a claim that they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, is that it was true. So take the time to read and hear what it is they are saying about Jesus.

But for those of us who are Christians, the challenge is slightly different isn't it? You see, when Paul defends his life and his preaching like this, the encouragement is clear, isn't it? This is what authentic Christianity looks like. It's not about using or manipulating others, it's about loving them and sharing your life, as you share the gospel with them. So when we talk to our friends and colleagues about Jesus, or get into a debate or argument about issues of faith, or truth, or morality, or whatever, our motives in doing that are going to be pure – as Paul's were. And we're not going to be one thing in private and another in public. We're not going to water down the gospel to try and butter people up, or fudge the difficult bits and so deceive people, but neither are we going to be harsh and overbearing. Like Paul, we'll be gentle, we'll do it from a heart full of love, that wants to share, not just the good news of Jesus, but our lives. That instead of wanting to get from others, we'll want to give to others.

So, as Paul says in v3, their appeal to the Thessalonians to believe the gospel did not spring from 'any attempt to deceive.' In other words, they weren't wearing a mask. And it's that kind of authentic, transparent, self-sacrificing, grace-filled Christianity that a cynical world needs to see. And to see in your and me.

But if that's easy to say, if you know anything at all about your own heart, or about the masks we all wear, it's a totally different thing to do, isn't it?

Lifting the Mask
You see, here Paul reminds them that despite being mistreated in Philippi, they came to Thessalonica to do it all over again. But how can you do that? When you get hurt or rejected for doing or saying the right thing, whether that is by friends and colleagues, or within your marriage or family, how can you make yourself vulnerable all over again, when you really feel like putting the walls up and protecting yourself?

And here Paul says that his motives in talking to them about Jesus were pure. But which of us can say that, everytime when we talk to others, or get into a debate, we aren't trying to score points, or look good, or impress others – whether that's the ones your talking to, or your friends at church?

And Paul says in v4 that he had been 'approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man but to please God.' So he wasn't about to water that message down for a new audience. I mean imagine that your grandparents entrusted your parents with a family heirloom, just as they had been entrusted with it by their parents. And now your parents are passing it on to you. And they say, 'son, each generation has passed this on. And now we're entrusting it to you.' How do you treat that thing? You don't take a screwdriver and a hammer to it and break it up, do you. This has been entrusted to me, and I'm going to pass it on to my children as it has been passed on to me.

So when Paul says he has been entrusted with the gospel, he isn't about to water-down the message to make it more palatable. But don't we all feel the temptation to do exactly that when it comes to truth? When the truth is uncomfortable, when saying what it right is going to end up in you being ridiculed or side-lined, when there's a cost involved, and you face push-back, isn't there always this temptation to modify the message a bit, so it's more acceptable? To please people rather than God?

And we do that, because we want people to like us. We feel like we need their approval, their affirmation. So we lack the courage of Paul and what he calls in v2 his 'boldness in God.' And yet, this is not a boldness that tramples over people, is it? Any would be president has a kind of boldness that doesn't care who it tramples on. But a loving boldness – a boldness that is prepared to risk, not just taking a stand, but the risk of love – that's the boldness Paul is talking about. But where can you get that kind of courage from?

And then Paul says he wasn't trying to flatter anyone, or get glory from others. But aren't we all guilty of that at one point or another? And we flatter others, precisely because we want something in return. We say nice things about them because we want them to think well of us, so we can feel good about ourselves. So we use them and their approval for our own gain, for our own glory.

So, listen, it's easy to point the finger at high profile failures, and all the damage they do, but which of us do any better? And if they are brought down in flames because of the skeletons in their cupboards, which of us would like our

cupboards opened up to public view. And if they are shown to have been hypocrites, which of us, when our masks are lifted, look any better? So when Paul says in v4 that it is 'God who tests our hearts' which of us can stand up under that kind of scrutiny?

The Messenger Above all Messengers

Well there was one who could stand up under that scrutiny. And whilst you and I fall into the trap of being people-pleasers, Jesus came with the sole aim of pleasing his heavenly Father: Heb 10:7, 'I have come to do your will, O God'. And he, above everyone else, achieved it, as the voice came from heaven: 'This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased' (Matt 17:5). And he didn't come to use others, he didn't speak or preach to get from others, as Jesus himself said, 'The Son of Man came not to be served *but to serve*, and *to give his life* as a ransom for many' (Mk 10:45). And so just as a nursing mother pours out her life for her baby, so Christ poured out his life at the cross for people like you and me.

For people like us, who use people, who seek our own glory and prestige from others, who flatter for our own gain, who wear masks to cover up what we are really like. The perfect Son of God came and poured out his life for the likes of us at the cross. And that's the good news of God as Paul calls it, that because of what Jesus did, and not because of what we have or haven't done, you and I can be counted righteous and accepted by God. The one who lifts the mask, and sees deep into our hearts, who knows us better than we know ourselves, sees us as holy, and accepts us and brings us into his family, because he sees us in Jesus.

But it's also knowing that, that can give you the power to become more like Paul here in Thessalonica, as he was becoming more like Jesus. You see, when you know the depth of what Jesus has done for you, you'll want others to know that for themselves. So you'll want to share the gospel with others. But knowing that your heavenly Father loves you and accepts you as you are, because of Jesus, will free you from doing that in a way that manipulates people, or flatters people. Because when you have your Father's approval, you don't need to crave other's approval to feel good about yourself. So you won't fudge the message to suit your hearers because you're freed from the tyranny of trying to please everyone.

But it will also stop you from becoming some kind of cold-hearted fundamentalist who cares nothing for the people he's talking to. For a start, you know you are no better than anyone else. You know that you are so sinful that Christ had to die for you, so there's no finger pointing at the foot of the cross. But secondly, when you know that Jesus loved you so much that he did die for you, that he poured out his life that you might have life, then that love has the power to melt your hard heart and warm your cold heart. And then, like Paul, that love will overflow – not in a life that uses or abuses others, but in one of loving boldness and courage, that goes the distance, and sacrifices so that others might know that life changing love of Christ.