



# Becoming a Model Church

Sermons from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians

## Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians

### Genuine Leaders

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

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### Introduction: Good comes out of evil

On Tuesday evening, Yvonne and I sat down to watch a memorial programme about the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, one of Hitler's concentration camps. It wasn't a date - but it could have been.

*"I walked a mile with Pleasure;  
She chatted all the way;  
But left me none the wiser  
For all she had to say.*

*I walked a mile with Sorrow;  
And ne'er a word said she;  
But, oh! The things I learned from her,  
When Sorrow walked with me."*

The wiser Solomon put it like this: *"It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart."* (Eccles 7:2)

All the speakers at this gathering were saying the same thing, "We must remember the Auschwitz" "We must never let this happen again" "We must be vigilant," and so on. You could see, through these remembrance gatherings, some good coming out of the Horror of the Holocaust.

This principle of good following evil, or good coming out of evil, can be seen everywhere. A child touches a sharp or hot object and learns to avoid danger; a plane falls to the ground but the investigation results in safety improvements that preserve thousands of lives; a virus kills hundreds and the medical world learns how to check the contagion next time round: shut down airports, close down cities, and so on. Good so often comes out of, or follows evil.

Where does a beautiful pearl come from? A small irritating piece of grit enters the shell of an oyster. To protect itself the clam covers the grit in layer after layer of what turns into a beautiful pearl. What's the source of precious diamonds? Under immense pressure and extreme temperature tiny crystals are able to grow into prized diamonds.

The Bible is full of similar examples of good coming out of evil, but in the Bible, it is not just a wishful hope, "good will come out of evil," but instead it is God, the mighty ruler of the universe, overruling Satan to bring about his good and loving plans. In fact, in the Bible, it could be argued that God's chosen way of accomplishing good is by overruling sin and suffering and sorrow.

Nations are saved from severe famine: How? Through the anguish of a young Joseph who was sold as a slave to Egypt and then wrongly imprisoned, but through that suffering was brought to the notice of King Pharaoh and put in charge of food stores. A beautiful book of comfort is written, the book of Job, a source of consolation for millions. But how was it written? Out of the bitter sufferings of Job who lost his family, wealth and health in one disaster after another. And the greatest example of all, God accomplishes salvation for all who will believe; the forgiveness of all our sins, peace with God and hope beyond the grave! How? Through the sufferings, the injustice, the desertion, the crucifixion of his beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. *"We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ."* (Hebrews chapter 10) It seems to be God's chosen way, his appointed way, to bring about wonderful things, is through hardship and adversity and suffering.

It's the way God works in our lives too!

The pearl of empathy, that beautiful ability to understand and enter the world of someone else, is not dropped into a human heart, no, though it could be! It is more often forged there through some deep trial. I have a Christian brother who feels deep empathy for people who face injustice – why? - because he himself has faced injustice. The diamond of perseverance, the ability to keep on going, to plod forever, is found in those who have passed through all kinds of trials! If only you and I would always believe in God's sovereign power to turn evil into good, we would face all our suffering so differently! *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."* (James 1)

Let no believer feel discouraged or downhearted this morning! But may God give to each of us the faith to believe that through sorrows and trials he is making diamonds and pearls.

I say all of this because the twelve verses in front of us this morning are a pearl, they provide one of the very best descriptions in the whole of the New Testament of what a Christian leader should be like. But this pearl was formed out of the pit of painful slander!

Let me explain: If you are new to us this morning, we are making our way through a little letter in the NT called, "1 Thessalonians." This little letter was written to a church which Paul and his colleagues Silas and Timothy founded in the city of Thessalonica on Paul's second missionary journey. As Paul

preached the Gospel, many people became true followers of Jesus at Thessalonica. That made the religious leaders jealous of Paul's gifts and success, and so they hounded him out of the city. And once Paul was out of the city, these jealous religious leaders began spreading lies and slander about Paul in the hope that the new converts would ditch not only Paul, but this new "Christianity." If we can destroy the messenger, they reasoned, we'll be able to destroy the message.

When Paul heard about this terrible slander through Timothy, he wrote to defend his godly leadership and in so doing, reveals to us what genuine Christian leadership should be like. The grit in the oyster is the lies and slander, but the pearl is the description of true and genuine Christian leadership.

### **#1 The Grit in the oyster—the slander against Paul**

What were Paul's jealous enemies saying behind back? Reading between the lines, at least these kinds of things...

1. *"Paul is an incompetent bungler!"* Nothing he does is successful, I mean look, he is hounded out of every city before he can finish his task! Frankly, Paul doesn't have a clue! If he planned his missions properly this wouldn't happen. It was, of course a lie! "You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure." (verse 1)

2. *"Paul is a coward"* I mean, as soon as the heat's on he scarpers out of town like a cat on a hot tin roof! Untrue. If Paul was a coward he would not have continued to preach after his beating in Philippi, would he? *"We had previously suffered and been insulted at Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his Gospel in spite of strong opposition."* (Verse 2) Paul was no coward!

3. *"Paul's motives are impure."* Paul's got all sorts of deep wicked motives for starting this church at Philippi. Remember all the prominent women who were converted (Acts 17), "Need we say any more!" He's just one more of those travelling religious quacks trying to get things out of you by saying stuff you like to hear and by flattery." Another flat lie: *"Our appeal does not spring from impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel. We are not trying to please men but God who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery.....we were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else."* (Verse 3)

4. *"Paul's only in it for the money."* What a wicked lie! *"As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you (financially, right)...surely you remember brothers our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden on anyone while we preached the Gospel to you."* (Verse 3)

5. *"Paul is a dictator."* Commanding you to do this and that and forbidding you to do that! Old Bossy Boots Paul! Paul admits that as a father who wants the best out of his children, he did encourage and urge them onwards, *"we dealt with you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you.."* (Verse 11) Why? He wanted them to live up the high standard of God's

calling, "... to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory." We are subjects of the King of kings, citizens of the only kingdom which has no end! Paul, set high standards for God's people; but he was no dictator, instead, *"We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her children."* (verse 7).

And finally,

6. *"Paul's a wicked man."* If only you knew Paul well! He puts on this mask of godliness, but actually, he's a wicked man. Paul's defence is that he lived among them at close quarters, at Jason's house with nothing to hide, *"You are witnesses and so is God of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed."* (Verse 10) Paul is not claiming sinless perfection, but he is claiming to be a godly man.

## **#2 The Pearl in the oyster—the marks of genuine Christian leadership**

Enough of the grit, which no doubt Paul felt acutely and painfully. Now for the pearl! Out of this bitter experience of Paul, and for the learning of the church in all ages, come five marks of true and genuine Christian leaders. Are you ready for them? These are important!

(1) *True Leaders are approved by God, v.4* "We speak" verse 4 "as men approved by God." What does Paul mean? He means that he did not appoint himself to this task, but God appointed and approved him. On the road to Damascus Jesus called him. And so it must be with all genuine leaders! How does that happen in the church? It happens when existing Christian leaders who have been appointed by God see the spiritual gifts in others and appoint them.

(2) *True leaders are godly, v.10, "You are our witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed."* When Paul uses the word blameless he does not mean sinless, he means that before God and the world he lived a godly life, in God's power, grace. When we look for the leaders we are looking for godly men and women. We're not looking for clever people, or successful people or rich people. We're looking for godliness of character and life.

Someone this week described their boss to me in these words: He is a "sadistic control freak, and the more you ask him for help, the more he digs his heels in." God spare the church from evil men like that!

(3) *True leaders are not motivated by personal reward, v.5-6. "You know that we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else."* (5-6) Christian leaders are not motivated by what they can get out of the role, whether fame, or money or praise. I have sometimes come across men—and it is often men—who will serve only if they given a title which everyone knows about. They won't serve if it's in the background and no-one knows about it! They need a badge, a title, an office, but a true leader is not motivated by what they can get...instead...

(4) *True leaders love people, v.7-8.* Paul says that his team were “*like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the Gospel of God but our lives as well.*” (7-8) I have no doubt that we would have found Paul chatting with Christians in Costa Thessalonica, Pret-a-Philippi and Café Berea! Genuine Christian leaders love people! And finally,

(5) *True leaders are faithful to the truth.* If Paul had wanted an easy life, he would have missed offensive bits out of the Gospel message, and tweaked it here or there, to make it fit with the philosophy and culture of Thessalonica. He’d have preached a chameleon Gospel.” “Let’s not talk about sin, let’s miss out hell.” But he was utterly faithful to the message, at great personal cost.

Remember John the Baptist? He told Herod that adultery was sin. He was faithful to the truth, and what happened to him? He lost his head.

We live in a day, where in the West, in the UK and even here in Worcester, leaders are departing from the truth. But genuine leaders are called to pass on the truth, “that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” (Jude 1:3)

This coming week, as a tragic example of how our very own city is drifting from the Gospel, Steve Chalke is speaking at the Cathedral—of all places. Steve Chalke, has long departed from the Christian faith. I don’t who has invited him, but the Bishop of Worcester should ban him, if he wants to be regarded as a genuine Christian leader. Genuine leaders do not and will not depart from the truth once for all delivered to the church.

### #3 The Lessons for us all

**(1) A word to all church leaders—this is what you are to aspire to.** Whatever your leadership role, whether it is in the home, among children or young people, or as a deacon, and particularly as a pastor or elder, this is what you and I are to aspire to, to aim for, to reach up to, with God’s help.

1. To be approved by God, not self-appointed
2. To live a godly life, in the power of God’s Spirit
3. Not to be motivated by what you can get out of ministry
4. But instead to be motivated by love for the people you serve
5. And to be faithful to the truth

If you think God is calling you into leadership—here are the qualities you need. One person described their personal experience of a former CEO of a famous phone company like this, “*he cut in front of his employees at the lunchtime cue, he berated the restaurant staff, parked in spaces reserved for handicapped people and to round it off, told his staff how much they “sucked.”*”

**(2) A word to all church members—this is what we are looking for.** When we appoint leaders we don’t chose the way the world chooses, we’re not to look for personality, riches, natural gifts, wealth.

Instead we are looking for those who

1. Are approved by God
2. Live a godly life
3. Are not motivated by what they can get out of ministry
4. But instead by love for the people they serve
5. And those who will be faithful to the truth

**(3) A word for everyone—this is what Jesus is like, yet perfectly**

Human leaders, are imperfect, human leaders will no doubt on occasion fail, but not the Lord Jesus Christ, the great leader, the Chief shepherd of the Sheep.

1. He was approved, appointed and sent by God the Father, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” (Luke 4:18)
2. He lived not merely a godly life, he lived a sinless life,
3. He was never motivated by what he could get out of ministry, “*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many*” he said
4. Instead, Jesus was motivated by love for a lost world, a love that led him to the cross
5. And he was always faithful to the truth,

And this Jesus, today, calls all of us to follow him: “*Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*” (Matthew 11)