

The Message and the Messenger

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

To understand any letter, you need to know the background to the letter. The church Paul was writing to was born in the midst of violent opposition. Paul had to flee the city because of a riot. This explains why he defends himself in this passage.

The Problem with Preachers

At the time of this letter travelling philosophers and religious teachers were common. Among them were frauds, who were happy to take people's money. Paul defends his ministry against just such accusations, that he is no different from these other types.

If you can discredit the messenger, you can discredit the message. So Paul puts the record straight.

Authentic Ministry

When Paul writes that his visit was 'not in vain' – he was referring to the character of his ministry: it was not insincere, or shallow. Instead, he came after already having suffered at Philippi. But Paul was prepared to face further suffering at Thessalonica because he knew his message was true. Paul had nothing to hide – he was not just another religious hypocrite.

Paul takes time to make it clear that the usual kind of temptations – money, sex and power, were not what was motivating him. Instead, it was desire to please God, and he and his team were like a nursing mother with her baby, among them. And a nursing mother does not take from her baby, rather she pours out her life for it. And so this kind of ministry is more than just words – it puts your life on the line.

What does this have to say to us? For non-Christians, it tells us we can trust Paul and the other New Testament writers. They weren't trying to manipulate people. We should take time to listen to what they are saying. For Christians, the encouragement is that this is what authentic Christianity looks like: sharing the gospel from right motives, not watering it down. And instead of being harsh and judgmental, being gentle, and doing it all from a heart of love.

Lifting the Mask

The problem is that we don't want to make ourselves vulnerable again once we have been hurt; our motives are anything but pure; and we are tempted to water down the message to please others. We want others to like us, so we lack courage. So how can we ever be the people we should be?

The Messenger Above all Messengers

Jesus came with the sole aim of pleasing his Father. And he did. He came not to be served but to serve. Like a nursing mother he also poured out his life for us – who don't deserve it. In him we are counted right before God. That's the good news of the gospel. But that also changes us: when we know what Jesus has done, we'll want others to know it too. Because we know the Father's love for us, we won't need to manipulate others, or alter the message to please them. We won't be hard or cold-hearted, because the love of Jesus will transform us and humble us. And we will want to give our lives for the good of others, as he did for us.