



## A BIBLICAL ALTERNATIVE TO PASTORAL BULLYING & SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

SAM STORMS

### I THESSALONIANS 2:1-12 ESV

*1 For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. 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. 3 For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, 4 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. 5 For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. 6 Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. 7 But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. 8 So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.*

*9 For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. 11 For you know how, like a father with his children, 12 we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.*

### SERMON

It almost goes without saying that there is today an ever-increasing *crisis of integrity and morality* among Christian leaders. To say it in slightly different terms, there's an ***epidemic of pastoral and ministerial bullying*** rampant in churches everywhere. It grieves me to say that, especially in light of what the author of Hebrews says about the accountability of pastors and elders. We read in Hebrews 13:17 that leaders in the church of Jesus Christ "are keeping watch over your souls, as *those who will have to give an account*." I'm not exaggerating or trying to be melodramatic when I say that every time I read those words I tremble. And so should every pastor or elder or leader in the body of Christ.

And yet, in spite of that text and the warning it issues, we continue to hear on a daily basis of moral failures and ethical lapses and bullying among those who have been entrusted with the souls of God's people. Let me give you an example. The following is a report from only one day, July 13, 2024, found on The Roys Report.

- Robert Morris Resigns from Gateway Church; Victim Says Church Knew Details of Her Abuse Years Ago
- Longtime Pastor at Chuck Swindoll's Dallas-Area Megachurch Fired for 'Moral Failure'
- S.C. Church Parts Ways With Pastor Who Had Child Sex Criminal Conviction
- Convicted Sex Offender Serving as 'Prison Ministries Campus Pastor' at Embattled Gateway Church
- Gateway Settled Lawsuit Alleging Sexual Harassment, Hostility At Church Robert Morris Founded
- Filing: Request to Dismiss Disgraced Former SBC President's Defamation Case Due to His 'Now-Admitted Lies'
- Christian Billionaire Convicted of Fraud, Could Spend Decades in Prison
- Pastor To 'Rest' As Church Acknowledges It Knew of His Child Sex Criminal Conviction
- Christian Schoolteacher Caught With Child Sex Abuse Material Faces Prison Time
- Sixth Woman Joins Group Alleging Kansas City Pastor Abused Them

Although that was the report on only one day, it is truly representative of what is happening everywhere in the church of Jesus Christ.

Virtually every year a poll is taken among average Americans to determine what are the *most trusted* professions and the *least trusted*. Among the most trusted in almost every poll taken are doctors, scientists, and teachers. Among the least trusted are journalists, advertising executives, and at the bottom of every list in every poll taken are politicians. No great surprise there. But what I find most disconcerting is where pastors or ministers rank. It is usually somewhere in the middle, just below TV news anchors, lawyers, and the police. The Roys Report of July 13 suggests that pastors and ministers might actually be lower than that.

The fact that politicians are the least trusted profession in our country does not give me a lot of confidence in our upcoming election in 2024. Isn't it ironic that those men and women who are trusted less than anyone else are the very ones we put in the most powerful positions in our society? We trust them to implement justice, create laws, and protect us from our enemies, and yet no one in society is trusted less than they are. It seems like we should elect those people whom we trust, who are honest, and who can be counted on to do the right thing when it comes to our laws. Alas, that is not the case. Of course, there are exceptions. Here in Oklahoma, we have several highly ethical and trustworthy men and women both in our state government and in Washington, D.C.

Most polls indicate that there are at least ten other professions that rank higher in terms of their trustworthiness than do pastors. What should I say about this? I'm a bit reluctant to say anything. It reminds me of an episode of the TV show, *Andy Griffith*. Andy's son, Opie, has made a new friend named Arnold. When Arnold's father decides to take away the new bike he had only recently purchased for his son, Arnold throws a fit, screaming and hollering and crying. As Arnold's dad takes him out the back door to the woodshed, Opie asks his dad: "Is he going to get a spanking?" To which Andy replies, "Don't you think he deserves one?" Opie pauses, and then says, "I'd rather not say, since he is one of my own kind."

I don't like pointing a finger at pastors and ministers as ranking very low in this sort of public opinion poll. After all, *they are one of my own kind*. But recent scandals in the professing Christian world might actually push pastors even farther down the list in the ranking of most trusted professions, or conversely, up the list in the least trusted professions.

I rarely have a day in which I don't read or hear of yet another pastor, whether in a mega church or a mini church, having fallen into some sin: be it sexual immorality, or child abuse, or embezzlement of church funds, or bullying, or those many instances where a pastor has lied on his resume in order to get a job, or is caught plagiarizing his sermons. Then there are those who get caught reshaping the gospel, smoothing off the rough edges of biblical truth, or in some cases outright denial of explicit biblical teaching, all to enhance their status in the eyes of people.

If you think this is an entirely recent phenomenon, you would be mistaken. It has been present in the professing church for centuries. It is simply that in our day it has reached epidemic proportions. The apostle Paul speaks of it often in his letters. For example, in his second letter to the Corinthians, chapter four, verse two, he writes: "But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."

Later in 2 Corinthians 12 he says that "such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds" (2 Cor. 11:13-15). Does it surprise you to hear that Satan himself has "servants" in local churches?

After he had concluded his ministry in Ephesus, Paul addressed the Elders in that city by saying, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you [i.e. among the Elders of that church] not sparing the flock; and *from among your own selves* will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). This is one reason why Paul laid down such strict and demanding requirements for any man who would aspire to be an Elder (see 1 Tim. 3:1-7).

He gets even more explicit in 1 Timothy 6:3-5 where he talks of those who are "puffed up with conceit and understand nothing." This person "has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain." Such people, says Paul, "must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach" (Titus 1:11).

My point, in case you haven't picked up on it, is that the corruption and immorality and greediness of so many pastors today is hardly a new thing. It's been around from the start.

But my primary reason for describing these people is to set up in your minds a contrast with what Paul says about the godly pastor, the minister whose only ambition is the glory of Christ and the good of his people. That is what

Paul does for us here in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12. He mentions no fewer than 14 things that are essential for anyone who claims to be a Christian, be that person a pastor or simply a regular believer in the church of Jesus Christ. We should also recognize that if there was anyone who might appear to have the right to assert himself and lord it over people in some sort of authoritarian manner, it was Paul. And yet he says in v. 6 that "we did not seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ."

Paul's primary focus, however, is on pastors, elders, leaders in the body of Christ. If I could say anything to those in pastoral ministry today, I think I would appeal to 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12.

### *Context*

You may not be aware of this, but every time I preach from some passage in Scripture, one of the goals I have in mind is **helping you learn how to read your Bible**. And one of the most important features of Scripture that we dare not overlook is what we refer to as *context*.

For example, here in 1 Thessalonians 2 we quickly realize that Paul is actually elaborating on something he said earlier in 1:5. Paul wrote: "You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake." And now here in 2:1-12 Paul unpacks in considerable detail precisely what he meant by mentioning the "kind" of persons he and Silas and Timothy were when they arrived in Thessalonica.

But there is more. When we unpack 2:1-12 I don't want you to think that this applies only to pastors or ministers of the gospel. It certainly does apply directly to them, but it is equally relevant for what God asks of all of you. I say this because you may draw an unwarranted conclusion from 2:1-12, thinking that Paul is boasting and drawing attention to himself to enhance his reputation. But if you will look back at 1:6 you can see that the apostle is describing his conduct because he wants everyone to understand that the way he lived and behaved is expected of all Christians, whether you are a pastor or not. He said in 1:6 – "you became imitators of us and of the Lord." Paul's example is only good to the degree that he imitates Jesus. And here in 2:1-12 he lays out for us what imitating him and Jesus actually looks like.

### *Characteristics of Paul's life and ministry in Thessalonica and his expectations of all Christians*

***(1) We should never be deterred from boldly proclaiming the gospel because of the threat of suffering and affliction (vv. 1-2).***

The word translated "in vain" generally means without any good effect. Paul is confident that his ministry in Thessalonica was fruitful.

Paul and Silas were "shamefully treated". The word translated "shamefully" could also be rendered "in an insulting" or "spiteful manner." Paul and Silas were publicly stripped and beaten with rods ("many blows") (Acts 16:22) without any inquiry into the charges against them. They had their feet fastened in stocks (Acts 16:23). They were thrown in prison (Acts 16:23). They were thrown into the "inner" prison (Acts 16:24). The "inner" prison is the one typically reserved for the worst of criminals and was designed to intensify their suffering. There would have been extremely poor ventilation and considerable darkness.

No one enjoys being treated this way, but all of us should expect it if we are true to the gospel of Jesus. The gospel, in case you hadn't thought about this, is glorious good news to those whose hearts have been touched by the Holy Spirit and who realize they need the atoning blessings of Christ's death. But it is equally offensive and hideous to those whose hearts are hard and impervious to the message about Jesus. We should never be surprised to suffer insults and ridicule and mockery from unbelievers. That's par for the course!

In spite of being treated this way Paul and Silas "had boldness" in preaching the gospel, fully aware that what happened to them in Philippi could well happen again in Thessalonica. I can assure you that as they made their way out of Philippi to Thessalonica, their conversation during that 100-mile journey would have gone something like this: "Hey guys, I hope your body has recovered from that severe beating with rods we just endured, because I fully expect

to get the same treatment in Thessalonica." I'm quite certain Paul would not have said: "Men, I've gone back over how we preached the gospel in Philippi that resulted in our getting the tar beat out of us, and I think I've figured out a way to change the message and make it less offensive so that we don't get the same response in Thessalonica that we just experience in Philippi." No!

What any other person would have assumed *excused* them from continuing to preach, served only to *motivate* them. Their boldness was "in God" (v. 2). I.e., it came from God, not from any natural resolve or power of their own will. To boldly proclaim the gospel "in much conflict" (v. 2) one must be filled with a boldness that only God can supply. When you have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone, the first thing you should do is pray for boldness!

Could it be that it was precisely the way Paul responded to persecution and suffering that awakened the Thessalonians to the truth of the gospel? Could they possibly have watched him labor in the midst of horrible affliction and concluded, "We need to listen to what this guy has to say. It's hard to think that he would suffer this way for something he knew to be false."

What is missing from this is something that many would have expected. They think that since Paul was so horribly beaten and shamefully treated in Philippi that his approach in Thessalonica would have been more circumspect. In other words, wouldn't common sense tell Paul that if he got the tar beat out of him in Philippi, he shouldn't expect to be treated any better in Thessalonica? But Paul spoke with the same boldness and unbridled clarity and zeal in Thessalonica that he did everywhere else.

***(2) The ministry of gospel proclamation in Thessalonica was altogether consistent with the truth; there was no "error" (v. 3a).***

There is a simple way to avoid conflict and opposition. Just tinker with the gospel and make it palatable to human taste. No hell. No wrath to come (1:10). No need to believe in Jesus, just be sincere. There are multiple ways to God. Your works are enough. No need to repent. How ever you wish to behave sexually is fine. Just be sincere.

One of the more sinister ways in which some preachers/teachers incorporate "error" into their messages is by placing it within statements that sound biblical. When you hear something that is true and consistent with Scripture you are less inclined to detect anything that may be amiss. Error is most dangerous when it is mixed in with truth.

***(3) The ministry of gospel proclamation in Thessalonica was not combined with "impurity" (sexual misconduct) (v. 3a). They weren't engaged in sexual immorality or idolatry or any form of sinful sexual conduct.***

In every other place where Paul uses this term translated, "impurity," it refers to sexual immorality or uncleanness. I don't know if you are aware of this but in the past year or so there has been a virtual flood of sexual misconduct in the professing body of Christ. The most bewildering part of this is that it is found primarily among pastors, elders, ministers, leaders in the church. And worse still, the frequency of child sexual abuse has reached almost epidemic proportions. The Roys Report cited earlier bears witness to this. And I assure you, it wasn't just on this one day that so many perpetrators were mentioned. It has become standard fare.

***(4) The ministry of gospel proclamation in Thessalonica was not done with a view to deceiving them (v. 3b).***

We might even render this, "any attempt to *trick* you into believing." Deceptive tactics were abhorrent to Paul and they must be equally offensive to us. Some think he is referring here to the miracles and signs and wonders by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1:5). Perhaps people would be tempted to say that Paul performed a bunch of circus tricks or magical acts and passed them off as the work of the Spirit, all designed to deceive the people in Thessalonica.

***(5) The gospel itself is not to be toyed or tinkered with in any way; it must not be altered, enlarged or shrunk, with rough edges removed, or in any way reconstructed to be palatable to the tastes of anyone. The gospel is a trust, something God has deposited with us only after he approved of our character, intensions, and motives (v. 4a).***

Paul was constantly aware of ministering under the gaze and judgement of God. He doesn't tell us how he knew he was "approved by God," but we can rest assured that God had placed his stamp of approval on Paul and his ministry. The word translated "approved" means affirmation after undergoing a test or examination. What had Paul done or said that indicated God had approved him and considered him worthy of being entrusted with the gospel? We aren't told, but perhaps it is precisely what he just mentioned in v. 2. Paul's ministry was not interrupted or destroyed when he suffered and was shamefully treated in Philippi. And he had declared the gospel in Thessalonica "in the midst of such conflict." I think it is only reasonable that when God saw Paul's determination in the midst of persecution and his resolute commitment to the gospel in spite of being so horribly mistreated, he approved him for ministry in Thessalonica. "This is a man," said the Lord, "to whom I can entrust my gospel."

***(6) Our gospel proclamation was never intended to please people, but only God (v. 4b).***

Any effort on our part to speak and live in such a way that people would like us better and promote us was completely out of bounds, because although we may have been capable of tricking other people, it is God who has tested and approved the intent of our hearts.

How does God do this? How would Paul know if his heart passed the test? Many try to eliminate as much as possible the subjective nature of our Christian experience. They are uncomfortable with talking about how the Lord might communicate directly with us. But Paul is saying that the intentions of my heart, the goal that I have in mind, the depth of commitment I have toward these Thessalonians, is examined by God, tested by him to see if it is pure and righteous, and then somehow made known to him by God.

***(7) Our ministry was never characterized by flattery (v. 5a).***

This is the only time in the NT that this particular word is used. It was common among itinerant philosophers to butter up their audience in order to gain a hearing or to increase the size of the crowd.

So many of the problems we see in church ministry today is the result of pastors gearing their efforts with one goal in mind: to secure praise from people, to be loved and blessed by people. Paul isn't saying that the alternative is to intentionally offend them. The alternative is to do everything to please God.

***(8) Our ministry was never motivated out of a desire for monetary gain. God himself can bear witness to this (v. 5b).***

Paul never preached the gospel with greed as his motivation. He never sought to make money off those who in gratitude responded positively to his ministry. He never shaped, fashioned, or tailored his gospel to increase the size of an offering.

***(9) Paul and Silas couldn't have cared less whether people in Thessalonica or elsewhere honored and glorified and praised them (v. 6).***

Although Paul and Silas could have strutted in pride as being called as apostles and demanded special treatment, they refused to do so. They never paused before saying something, asking themselves: "Are people going to like this? If not, I'll change my message. And once I find out what makes them happy, I'll focus my ministry on that."

Do you realize that God examines and evaluates our innermost thoughts and feelings and intentions? Have you been deceived into thinking that he is only concerned with external behavior, that your thoughts are hidden from him? Paul says otherwise. God "tests our hearts" (v. 5). He is "witness" to our motivation. The only way that could be true is if God knows every idea, dream, plan, thought, and feeling that you experience.

***(10) Our ministry was gentle, the same way a nursing mother tenderly cares for her infant child (v. 7).***

Some Greek manuscripts have the word "infants" instead of "gentle." But on either reading, the meaning is much the same. For how does one behave as if an "infant" if not gently and lovingly? This doesn't mean Paul avoided hard

topics like judgment and repentance, etc. Even difficult and offensive truths can be communicated in a way that people will know we say what we do because we care for them.

Look at how Paul could claim as an apostle absolute authority and yet chose to minister "gently" to the Thessalonians. ***Having spiritual authority does not mean you have a license to run roughshod over God's people. It means you have a responsibility to serve them as gently and lovingly as a mother nursing her infant child.***

***(11) So deep and intense was their affection for the people in Thessalonica that they were more than happy not simply to proclaim the gospel but to share anything they might have to give (v. 8).***

"Selves" is actually the word for "souls." We have an echo of this verse in 2 Corinthians 12:15 where Paul says of the Corinthian believers, "I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls." So many today view their congregation as a means to an end. They see the people as a way to get more for themselves, to promote their reputation and status, to gain money. Not Paul.

The phrase, "we were ready to share" doesn't fully convey the intensity of Paul's affection for them. He literally says, "we were *pleased* to share" with you both the gospel and our very lives. We didn't feel this way out of some obligation enforced on us from outside, as if we only felt this way because of some law that demanded it. "You had become very dear to us" (v. 8b), is more literally, "you had become our *beloved*." That being true, you should only expect Paul to have ministered to them in gentleness and generosity. As you look back on your life as a Christian and the many years you have been involved in a church of one sort or another, did you find yourself treated this way by your leaders? I hope so.

***(12) So deep and intense was their affection for them that they refused financial support and held down jobs requiring their presence day and night. They refused to be a financial burden to the Thessalonians (v. 9).***

Paul was keenly aware that his enemies might accuse him of taking advantage of God's people to gain more money. To avoid any semblance of greed as a pretext, Paul refused to take anything from the Thessalonians.

Paul's financial policy is not one that he imposed on others. But it is clear that whenever he first arrived in a city and planted a church there, he declined any and all financial support. He worked with his hands to support himself so as not to be a burden to the people. But he didn't have to. He believed that he had a right to be supported by the people to whom he ministered, but he was so jealous of his reputation that he refused to take their money. He wanted to avoid any suggestion that he preached the way he did for monetary gain. He was happy to receive financial support from churches he planted after he left town. Here is how he describes his policy. See 1 Cor. 9:8-18.

***(13) Their ministry and conduct in Thessalonica were holy and righteous and blameless (v. 10).***

"Holy" refers to Paul's conduct in the sight of God, while "righteous" and "blameless" refer to his conduct when it is evaluated by people.

***(14) Not only were they gentle like a nursing mother caring for her infant child, they also conducted themselves the way a father would with this children: exhortation, encouragement, and an appeal to walk worthy of God (v. 11-12).***

Consider the development. Paul describes his ministry and manner first as gentle, then compares himself to a nursing mother, and finally to a loving and protective father.

To walk "worthy of God" does not mean that you live so as to make yourself worthy of his love and acceptance. It means that you live in a way that is consistent with the worth and beauty and value of God. Your conduct reflects God's own character. It means that you live in conformity with God's character and will.

*Conclusion*

Let me close with a word of advice for all of us. If you ever find yourself in a church where the leaders bully people, or lord it over them, or domineer the members, or aim primarily for their own glory rather than for the good of each person, or engage in any form of sexual misconduct, and they remain stubbornly unrepentant, get up out of your seat and walk away, and never look back.