

Sunday October 25th, 2020

1Thessalonians 2:1-8
“Who are you going to Trust?”

A defense attorney was cross-examining a police officer during a felony trial -it went like this:

Q: Officer, did you see my client fleeing the scene? A: No sir, but I subsequently observed a person matching the description of the offender running several blocks away. Q: Officer, who provided this description? A: The officer who responded to the scene. Q: A fellow officer provided the description of this so-called offender. Do you trust your fellow officers? A: Yes sir, with my life.

Q: WITH YOUR LIFE? Let me ask you this then officer-do you have a locker room in the police station-a room where you change your clothes in preparation for your daily duties? A: Yes sir, we do. Q: And do you have a locker in that room? A: Yes sir, I do. Q: And do you have a lock on your locker? A: Yes sir. Q: Now why is it, officer, IF YOU TRUST YOUR FELLOW OFFICERS WITH YOUR LIFE, that you find it necessary to lock your locker in a room you share with those officers? A: You see sir, we share the building with a court complex, and sometimes defense attorneys have been known to walk through that room.

“Oh Snap!” What a comeback. I don’t know about you, but I am finding it more and more difficult to trust people. There are people I know well, and I trust them, but only to a point. With strangers it’s a whole other kettle of fish isn’t it? Trust and truth are being assaulted in every way imaginable. Authority is clearly mistrusted when people refuse to wear a mask, and make a big fuss when they are told they must wear one to enter a store or restaurant.

In the Toronto Star on Oct. 20th, this past week, Amber Tamblyn and American Actor was in her mandatory 14-day isolation before beginning work on a new TV series. One day she heard quite a commotion and rushed to her balcony to see a large protest coming down John St. in Toronto. The protestors marched to against having to wear masks and that the Corona virus is over blown as a health crisis.

As a New Yorker she began shouting from her balcony as a counter protest, as she saw the devastation the virus wrought in New York city. In one day, 799 people in New York city died. That’s 33 people an hour. 30,000 people died in a month. She says she has seen what damage this virus can do and the lack of decisive leadership at the federal level of government can have on flattening the curve. In the end she says, “Wear your mask”!

Politicians are mistrusted when they cannot keep their facts straight, and disregard expert advice in favour of political expediency. We have a frightening example of misinformation, and abuse of authority, going on just south of us, don’t we? President Trump has spread so many false statements that he actually had his Twitter account blocked. I heard recently he is now telling approximately 30 lies or falsehoods a day.

His most recent assertion is that because he had the Corona virus and now tests negative, he is immune. At a rally last week, he bragged about how invincible he was to the virus, and he was going to wade into the crowd to kiss people. All this despite medical experts who are now seeing a few people who get reinfected after having the virus before.

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There is no medical evidence that you are immune after having this virus. Yet, some folks still trust him.

Trust was critical commodity in the early church. Without first hand knowledge and experience of Christ's ministry, the first believers, and several subsequent generations of believers, depended on verbal reports from those who were there. In Paul's case, he had his commission from Jesus on the road to Damascus, and had been taught by the other apostles. Despite his avowed credential however, some still doubted his claim that he was an actual apostle.

The other disciples even doubted the truth of his claim to be an apostle, given that he was not one of the original twelve, nor did he follow Jesus when he was among them in the flesh. The incredibly important role of the apostles cannot be overstated in the early church, and Paul fought to hold a position as an apostle until the day he died.

The chapter before us today from 1 Thessalonians, is among several things, a defence by Paul of his trustworthiness. Perhaps it seems odd, that we who adhere to scripture, (we are protestants aren't we?) and place considerable authority on the bible, including Paul's writings, should come to learn that not everyone in the early church accepted Paul at his word.

It didn't help either, that many false teachers, espousing heretical views, contradicted Paul and the other apostles. This passage and the following chapter, holds a great contrast for us to read. Paul's reputation, as measured by many in the Greco-Roman world, counted for little; yet at the same time they can be utterly confident that in God's court of honour and in the Thessalonians' own experience, Paul and the good news he shared, stands as trustworthy and effective.

One thing that may help us understand why Paul feels he needs to write these words is a phenomenon that was prevalent in the first century in Asia Minor and probably elsewhere. There was a profession, of sorts, called "sophistry". Maybe it's a word you've heard before, but its origins are quite fascinating. Today the word sophistry is used as a noun. It means the use of **fallacious arguments**, especially with the intention of deceiving. Synonyms for the word include trickery, deceit, evasion, etc. Empty words, is a good descriptor.

A derivative noun is very familiar to us. We say that we heard a fallacious argument. An argument of this type is one where there is no credibility, or an effort is made to trick people or sway them to a certain conclusion even if it is wrong. Does that sound familiar? Sophists as a profession, in the culture of the first century, described traveling teachers who would enter cities, display their oratorical skills through public speeches, and seek to attract students who might pay for their instruction.

It seems to have been a rather widespread phenomenon, as it attracted the ire of several commentators of the day. The ancient Greeks really embraced sophistry. We have the writings of several famous philosophers like Plato and Socrates, who depended on the financial support of their students to look after their persona needs. Plato was a student of Socrates, and likely paid for the opportunity. Aristotle, in turn, was a student of Plato and went on to tutor Alexander the Great.

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Remember in Acts when Paul went to the city of Athens. In Acts 17 it says that Paul was deeply disturbed by all the idols he saw. Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who hung out in the Agora (the word we get agoraphobia from) or marketplace, didn't like Paul. Paul has come to the public place where they debated each other, competing for students and in turn money. Paul was upsetting their apple cart, potentially stealing away their carefully mentored students.

Verse 21 is very telling, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new." They had what we can call "itchy ears". Sounds like our modern-day, social media, the water cooler, or local coffeeshop before covid. There were plenty of false teachers traveling around, whose only goal was money and fame. Thus, the root meaning got the word we now use today. Paul, here, seems to allude to the occupation of sophists, and it would seem Paul had been accused of being one himself.

This upset him, to be cast in such a negative and self-serving light. Therefore, he seeks to differentiate himself from such a profession in his letter before us today. As he tells the story of his coming to the Thessalonians, he notes that the encouragement offered by he and his fellow evangelists, came not from: error, nor impurity, nor deceit. Paul says they were not seeking to please people, but God. He implies that there are traveling teachers who do trade in error and impurity and deceit, which sounds very similar to a critique of these sophists.

Sophists again, was the term sometimes used to describe these teachers of wisdom, critiqued by first-century orator Dio of Prusa, who stated that sophists often had "deceitful" motives, performing only for personal gain and "reputation." The description of performing is interesting. Often the only way to sway people to a false narrative, is to enhance it with a bit of theatre. Televangelists are notorious for doing just that.

The first proof that Paul is different from these kinds of teachers, comes in the story of his sufferings. Having left a situation of suffering, and shame, in Philippi; where they suffered a terrible beating and nasty incarceration, he and Silas (this is the identity of the "we," according to Acts 16:25--17:9) came to the Thessalonians proclaiming the same message that had put him in the difficult situation in the first place.

He spoke the gospel with boldness, even though he was in a great struggle, literally in Greek a real *agoni* (from *agon*, struggle). Yes, its where we get our word agony from. If he had been a teacher primarily focused upon his own comfort and betterment, he was obviously preaching the wrong message to have suffered so grievously.

The second proof comes from none other than God. Paul and his fellow evangelists have been tested by God, and found to be trustworthy enough to be entrusted with the gospel. We could speculate what Paul means by being tested by God, but it would seem that his struggles in spreading the gospel was his test. He was proved and refined by the fire of difficult life experiences.

God, who knows all things about humans, not just the outward appearance, but also the heart, has found Paul and his companions to be honest. They held to their message despite very high personal cost. God is their witness (*martus*).

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The root of the word martyrdom. God has testified to the truth of Paul's message with power and the presence of the Holy Spirit (1:5). What better reference could Paul present?

For the final proof, Paul writes compellingly, and with heartfelt intensity about his feelings for this community. Paul states that their little band of missionaries could have "thrown around their weight" as apostles, literally been able to be a burden to the Thessalonians because of their rank. The Pauline writings make strong statements about the apostles. Not only is this integral to Paul's identity (note the introduction of himself in his letters), but Paul affords a particular priority to apostles (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 2:20).

He, following the model of the One Lord he preaches (Phil 2:5–11), does not selfishly grasp the glory of his position, but instead humbles himself to the point of being a babe (*epioi*). Other manuscripts have instead the closely-related word *nepioi*, gentle, and each reading has decent support. The manuscript support for the reading of "babe" is slightly stronger, so it seems that the stark comparison between the top leaders of the church, and an infant gets the drastic nature of his point across.

This term however, and its connotations, do not quite fit his larger argument. Were he and the other evangelists to conduct themselves like babies, then they would be dependent upon the Thessalonians, and therefore, a burden -- precisely what he was so intent to avoid. The mention of a little baby leads him, however, to a more fitting picture. Instead of an apostle throwing around his authority, Paul became like a nurse who cares for her own children.

Paul uses maternal language several times in his letters, where he is "concerned with the nurture and growth of believers." Paul says that he and Silas cared so deeply for the Thessalonians that he gave to them, in addition to the wonderful news of Jesus Christ, their very souls. As a nurse gives of her own body to provide milk for a child, so Paul was willing to give of himself, because he loved the Thessalonians so.

His final proof to assert his trustworthiness may not be as strong theologically as saying that God is his witness, but it carries immense pathos. How could they doubt him knowing how intensely he feels for them all? Paul Lee Tran in his *Encyclopedia of 7,700 illustrations* writes about an application that was submitted to a church looking for a pastor. Try an imagine how you would react to receiving this application, if you were on the search committee.

"Dear Christian Friends. I understand your pulpit is vacant and I should like to apply for the position. I have many qualifications: I have been a preacher with much success and also had some success as a writer. Some say I am a good organizer. I've been a leader most places I've been. I am over 50-years-old. I have never preached in one place more than three years. In some places I have left town after my work has caused riots and disturbances.

[I must admit I have been in jail three or four times, but not because of any real wrongdoing. My health is not good, though I get a great deal done. The churches I have preached in have been small, though located in big cities. I've not got along well with religious leaders in towns where I have preached. In fact, some have threatened me and even attacked me physically. I am not very good at keeping records as I tend to forget whom I have baptized.

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However, if you can use me, I shall do my best for you.” Would you consider someone like that? Could you trust someone with that kind of resume? Not sure? Well what if I told you these words, I just read for you describe Paul to a tee? Why is knowing about Paul so important for the Thessalonians? Well Merrill Tenney summed it up nicely when he wrote, “You cannot separate truth from the one who preaches it to you.”

Paul’s defense of his ministry continues past verse 8 as he asserts that he worked hard among them (1 Thessalonians 2:9) bringing the message of God (2:13). Why might he spend so much space of this letter in an apologia of his ministry? Clearly, Paul wants to remind them of his trustworthiness because he did bring the gospel, the Word of God that resulted in their redemption (1:10) and will result in their full salvation (4:17).

To continue in the way of life to which they are called, they must trust the message, and so they must trust the messenger. His defense serves not himself, but his apostolic ministry of discipleship. It is not hubris or self aggrandizement. As the Thessalonians remain confident in Paul’s selfless, divine, and loving work among them, they will be prepared to follow that message no matter the cost, and for as long as they need until Christ returns.

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