

With Love and Life- 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Cults and their Leaders

Recently, I have once again been studying and writing about cults. Now, there are lots of things that I could tell you about religious cults but today I only want to say one thing and that is that while some religious cult leaders can sometimes be genuinely looking for the truth but not finding it, others are simply using their made up religion to get something out of you.

Some cult leaders are searching for power and influence. Jim Jones took Christian ideas, wrapped them up in exciting church services and created a bunch of followers who became so loyal to him, that they moved to the jungle in Guyana, South America and did whatever he told them to do. In the end, 912 people died in a mass murder-suicide because Jim Jones told them that it was time to leave this world.

Joseph Smith, who founded Mormonism, loved women so much that he had around 40 wives though the vast majority of them were secret wives. Some of those women were already married to other men, but he secretly married them without their husbands knowing. Joseph Smith loved the power and influence he could have over people and he took from people whatever he wanted.

L. Ron Hubbard was a prolific writer of fiction and science fiction,¹ it was how he wanted to make money. But then he started a business which was supposed to try and help people become better people. He created the idea of dianetics and wrote books about it and got people to buy courses on improving themselves. The *Bridge to Life*, which is the full plan of books and courses found in what is now called the religion of Scientology, costs people hundreds of thousands of dollars to complete. L. Ron. Hubbard loved the money, power and influence he had over people which he gained through the cult of dianetics and the religion of Scientology. Now, his successor, David Miscavige enjoys all that money and power, which comes at the expense of all the people who join Scientology.

The point I want to make is that some religious cult leaders don't actually love the people under their care. They bring a message from "god" and sell it to those who are longing for God to speak to them. They do this for money, sex, and power which they take from anybody who will give it to them. They are like conmen who promise the world, who promise eternal life, but their words are empty words and false. They are only interested in taking what they can take from you. One of the difficulties people can have is trying to tell the difference between those cult leaders and the real ministers of God. And because people cannot see the difference between the true church of God and the dangerous religious cults, they find it hard to trust either of them.

Sophists

Paul was facing something similar with the church in Thessalonica. During Paul's time, there were people who were called *Sophists*. Sophists travelled around Greek cities and places like Thessalonica selling their

¹ When you put together his fiction, science fiction and his Scientology works, L. Ron Hubbard produced more than 250 published works.

philosophies and teachings. They were public speakers and teachers who would move from place to place, and they would debate with others in the hope of gaining a following. If they were any good, and they gained a group of followers, they would get paid for their speeches, debates and teachings. But once they had made their money they would move onto the next city or town and try to make more money from the people there. In the end, for all their intellect and their ability to speak well, they were not interested in telling the truth, they were only interested in making money. So, they would speak about anything that made them money and then move on.

You can understand why people may not have trusted the sophists and it seems that some people may have thought that Paul was a sophist. After all, he had come with a strange new message about the resurrection and how that led to eternal life. But then Paul left when some opposition came from the Jewish leaders of the synagogue. He went on to Berea and then Athens, speaking to the crowds and giving them this strange new message of the gospel. Maybe Paul was just a sophist, giving speeches about things he didn't really believe in, making his money off the people and then moving onto the next town to start his scam all over again.

Flattery

The question was, "How could you spot the difference between a real man of God bringing God's message, and a public speaker who just wanted to make money out of those gullible enough to believe him?" Today's passage is all about Paul defending his work and showing that he and his team were not like the travelling sophists or speakers.

1 Thessalonians 2:3 For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you.

Paul knew about those public speakers, those sophists, who came with impure motives, who came to trick people out of their money, their time, and their loyalty. Have a look at what he said in...

1 Thessalonians 2:5-6 You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed-- God is our witness. ⁶ We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority.

I've heard people quote the saying, "Flattery will get you nowhere." But actually, people love flattery. We all want people to think good things about us and when we hear people saying good things, we really like it. But the good news of Jesus, the gospel, is not full of flattery. The message that Paul brought to the people was about the problem of sin. Telling someone that they are a sinner, that they have nothing to offer God, that if they stood before God as they are, then God would send them to hell because they are unholy people standing in the presence of a holy God is not a message of flattery. The gospel is offensive and it is meant to either make you kneel before God in humility, or to arch up in anger against God. If religious leaders only ever talk you up, especially if they tell you that God will accept you as you are, then they are using flattery and you need to be careful of them.

Making Money

Paul also didn't come with greed as the thing that motivated him. As an apostle, he could have insisted on taking the money for himself, but he didn't. Look at what he said in...

1 Thessalonians 2:9 Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

Now, that burden could be understood in a number of ways, but I think he was talking about them looking after him financially. Paul did not want to be a financial burden on the churches he planted. So, he made sure he had a way of making his own money so that he could feed himself and not be a burden on anyone else. It was his way of making sure that people understood that the gospel he preached was free for anyone to receive and believe, unlike the message of the sophists. You might remember in last week's talk, how we can read the story of Paul planting the church in Thessalonica in Acts 17. Then because of opposition, Paul had to move to Berea and then to Athens. Have a look at how Act 18 starts...

Acts 18:1-3 After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.

We can see that Paul had a trade as a tentmaker and he used his tentmaking skills to support himself in Corinth. It makes sense to think that only three cities earlier, he would have used those same skills to support himself in Thessalonica. Unlike the travelling sophists who spoke their message for money, Paul supported himself. He did not come with greed, he did not come for praise, and he did not come with flattery, he came with the gospel.

Love and Life

Well, if Paul did not go to Thessalonica for his own benefit, then for whose benefit was he there for? This is where we turn to verse 8, which I believe is the key verse for this passage.

1 Thessalonians 2:8 so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

The problem with the travelling speakers, the sophists, was that they did not really care for the people. They were only there to make money. If they chose the right topic and spoke well enough, people would pay them to say more. But do you notice that Paul did not just share the words of the gospel, as important as that is, he shared his life as well. Paul knew those people and they knew him. His message was not just a message of words, his message was lived out in the way he related to the people he spoke with. His message was something he believed in. Notice how he said that he cared for them, that he loved them so much that he shared his life with them.

It is so important that our life and message be the same. Part of the gospel is that when we turn to God in repentance, then we love others with the same kind of love that God showed us. We are meant to show self-sacrificial love to others. I find this really hard to do, and I definitely find it harder to love some people compared to others. I don't always want to share my life with them. I want to pull back and not be loving. But that would make the words of the gospel empty if it is not joined with loving actions. Now, loving words and actions are not just all about saying nice things. Positive affirmation and flattery can have its place, but we do need to speak the truth of the gospel and that truth is that without real repentance and a turning away from sin, people will

face an eternity in hell. The most loving thing you can do is to tell them that, but do it in the context a real relationship.

A Spiritual Family

Throughout the last few verses of this passage we see Paul using words to describe the kind of relationship he believed he had with the Thessalonians. We start in verse 7, though it is hidden in some translations and to get the context I'm going to start reading from verse 6. I'm reading from the 2011 NIV.

1 Thessalonians 2:6-7a We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. ⁷ Instead, we were like young children among you.

Paul was an apostle. He held an important position as a Christian leader. And as we said earlier, he could have asserted his authority and demanded money and honour from this new church plant. What we see in the 2011 NIV was that Paul did not throw his weight around as an apostle. Instead, he came with a childlike nature. More gentle and playful than with the heavy hand of a powerful church leader. He then compared his care for them to a mother who nurses her newborn babies. Once again, it is gentle and loving care. Notice, in verse 9, that when he talks about his hard work, he calls them brothers and sisters. They worked together as equals. He made tents and preached the gospel, they worked in their jobs and helped create a new church plant. And finally, in verse 11, he said that he was like a father to them. He encouraged, comforted, and urged them on like they were his children. His spiritual children. What we see at the end of this passage is Paul talking about his relationship to the Thessalonians in terms of family relationships. But not just as a father figure, like most church leaders would say they are, he also saw how he was like a mother, a brother, and even a child with the Thessalonians.

As Christians, we are in a spiritual family. And like all families, we may not always get along, but we are supposed to love each other. There are times when we might have to work together as brothers and sisters. There are times when we might have to nurture and support each other in a gentle and loving way like a nursing mother who cares for her newborn child. There are times when we might have to encourage and urge each other on, doing our best to help each other make the next step in the journey of the Christian life, like a father urging his children to keep growing up and maturing. And there are times when we can be playful, gentle, and even innocent as children with each other. We are a spiritual family and we need to act like one.

Conclusion

Paul was able to show that he was not a sophist. He did not come to make money and to take advantage of the Thessalonians by giving them an empty message he did not believe in. He showed that the message he preached, the gospel, was truly what he lived and breathed. It was seen in his life, it was seen in his actions, it was seen in his love, it was seen in the relationships he had established with them. All those things lined up with the truth of the gospel. Yes, there are still "sophists" out there. Cult leaders, false teachers, wolves in sheep's clothing. No church or minister is perfect, but the test is whether his message, his life, and his love all align with God's Word. Pray for your church leaders and keep watch.