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## IT'S NOT A COOKBOOK 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

When I was a kid there was a TV show called *The Twilight Zone*. Episode 89 was a classic that included a line that has become an element of pop culture. In the episode a spaceship lands on earth carrying a crew of 9 foot tall beings called Kanamits. At first everyone is afraid of them, but the Kanamits assure the people of earth that they have only benevolent intent. One of them addresses the UN and leaves a book in his language. The central character of the show, Michael Chambers, is a cryptologist, so he and his staff set about trying to decode the book. Meanwhile the Kanamits share their technology and many of the persistent problems of the human race begin to be solved. People are convinced the Kanamits are good and seek only to help. People sign up to visit the Kanamit home planet, which is described as a paradise. Chambers is won over when Patty, a member of his staff, cracks the title of the book and finds it is called *To Serve Man*. But they are still unable to read the rest of the book. Chambers signs up to go on a trip to the Kanamit planet. As he is boarding their ship he sees Patty running toward him, frantic, trying to get to him. At the last second she yells, "Mr. Chambers, don't get on the ship. The rest of the book, *To Serve Man*...it's a cookbook!

There have been many movies and TV shows made with the premise that there are alien beings living among us. Invariably, they are here with nefarious motives. They are invaders or body snatchers, or are plotting to destroy us and take over our fair planet. What if there were actually alien beings living among us, only instead of being fearful enemies they were here with the purpose of doing good to humans? What if they were truly trying to serve people in a good way? The Bible says that actually is true, only the aliens are not beings from another planet. They are followers of Jesus Christ who actually belong in another world. But while they are in this one they truly are here to serve mankind, just like Jesus did.

The gospel of Jesus Christ transforms people. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says that those who are in Christ are a new creation, that the old has gone away. God is in the process of making a new kind of people, of restoring the shattered image of God in humans. Those who are changed then are by definition going to be different than other people who haven't been changed. This is why Peter said we would live as strangers and aliens in this world. But is that a good thing? Why is it important for us to be different than the world?

Wrapped up in our answers to those questions is the issue of human nature. The general belief of our culture is that people are basically good. The unfortunate tendencies we see in ourselves and others, they say, exist because of our environment. They are due to bad things that have happened to us. We have been mistreated as children, we've been ostracized or bullied by other people, we've been oppressed by some more powerful group, we haven't been educated, we were deprived, our parents haven't loved us properly, we have low self-esteem, we've been deprived or we have had some other bad condition forced upon us that has warped us. The premise then is if we could fix those external warping factors then the inherent goodness of people would come out and be seen in us all.

Most people are not downright evil, so it seems reasonable to think that they are mostly good. It can be shocking then to encounter what the Bible says about human nature. Romans 3:10 says, "there is no one righteous, not even one." Verse 12 says, "there is no one who does good, not even one." Genesis 8:21 is even more negative. God says, "every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood." The Bible claims that every tendency, every motive in our hearts is tainted with evil, even from when we're young. We are good at putting a nice face on, being kind when it suits us, but in a pinch when there's a crisis and we're pushed hard enough what's really in us will come out. And it is dark and frightening. If you push the right buttons, if you drill down deep enough, stuff will come out that is appalling. That's true of every human being according to the Bible.

These are two widely varying views of the real nature of humans. Which of them is correct? Albert Einstein said, "The real problem is in the hearts and minds of men. It is not a problem of physics but of ethics. It is easier to denature plutonium than to denature the evil spirit of man." Mark Twain agreed. He said, "Everyone is a moon and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody."

Paul Tripp uses the analogy of a glass of water. If it is jostled water spills out, because what's in the glass is water. When we get jostled just right and anger, selfishness, impatience, unkindness, vindictiveness or even meanness spills out, that's not the provocation's fault. It's because that's what's inside us. I got a glimpse of this problem in myself recently. Perhaps you have been following the saga of the homeless football team known as the Chargers. I have been a big fan of that team for a long time. I have had a serious problem with the billionaire owner, Dean Spanos. He is a billionaire who every year makes millions on that team and who, in my estimation, has run a terrible organization that typically treats people abominably. Yet he has insisted that he needs to make even more millions so he has been obsessed with moving his team to Los Angeles. Last week the NFL had a

crucial owners meeting in which the LA issue would be decided. Coming into the meeting it was reported widely that Spanos's plan to build a stadium on a toxic waste dump in Carson had the support of most of the owners and that his many friends would take care of him. Then his proposal was voted down 30-2. He got his head handed to him and he was mad. This is where my problem showed up. I was shocked at how much glee I got out of that. It wasn't just that his plan was thwarted. I wanted him to be humiliated, and it made me happy to see him get embarrassed. I really wished I could rub his face in it. I'm just being honest here. I wish it were not so, but I wanted that guy to get squashed. It was personal. In other words, the glass was jostled and what came out was pretty ugly.

Issuing people a bunch of rules or commandments isn't going to be very effective in dealing with that dark side that's embedded in us. It is like it is part of us so telling us to change it is like telling us to change our eye color. We simply can't do it no matter how much we might want to or how disciplined we are. What is needed is transformation from the inside out, and that's something that is beyond the reach of human will and determination. We can, by dint of serious effort, restrain our behavior. We can, when it suits us, control our actions so that we appear to be kind and good, but we cannot make that thing inside go away. That is why God came up with the plan of saving us apart from our ability to make ourselves truly good. As part of that plan, given to us through Jesus Christ, when we accept his gift we get his grace, his power and his Spirit. It is the grace, power and Spirit of God that is required to effect that radical internal transformation.

Yes, but you believe in Jesus don't you, Rick? Yes, I do. By your own admission that ugly thing is still inside you. You just said it was. Yes, it is still there. But it is being transformed by God's grace. It is more than a process of behavior modification, which is what many Christian programs tend to be. It is a matter of transforming who I am at my very core. That process will continue all my life, but some day it will be complete and there will be nothing but goodness in me. In the meantime God gives me instruction to know what that goodness looks like. It will be quite different, alien, from the way humans naturally are. The Thessalonian Christians experienced that transformation process. In their hearts was a desire to be the transformed, truly good people God wanted them to be. But what does that look like? Paul gave them instruction, but first he gave them an example. In this passage we will see his reminder of what he was like. From it we will also be reminded of what truly transformed lives look like. Let's look at 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 to see the example that they learned to imitate. We will see 3 main qualities that Paul highlighted about his own character among the Thessalonians.

## PAUL HAD COURAGE

Paul and his friends came to their town fresh from a daunting experience in Philippi. He says they “suffered and were treated outrageously” there. Indeed they were. They did nothing but help people and tell them about Jesus. They ended up facing a riot, being arrested, beaten and thrown into prison. That was not the worst thing that had ever happened to Paul. On a previous church planting trip he had faced another riot that climaxed with people stoning him and thinking they had killed him. I believe he lived the rest of his life with physical damage from that assault.

Have you ever thought about what that would do to you? Many years ago I was playing softball in a summer league. It was warm so I wore shorts when I played. One game I got a hit that was headed for the gap in the outfield. It had the potential to be a double so I ran hard thinking as I neared first base I was on my way to second. But as I rounded first base my foot lost traction on the hard dirt and slid out from under me. I went down on my bare lower left leg and skidded quite a ways on the dirt. Normally I would just get up and dust myself off. I couldn’t dust my leg off. It was bleeding on the whole width of my leg from my knee down to my ankle. The skid had ripped the skin off that whole side of my leg. That night the wound was excruciating. An athletic trainer who was in the dorm where I was staying looked at it and said there was dirt in there and I had a serious risk of infection. I needed to have it treated. I went to the health center. I told the nurse I had a strawberry on my leg. She said, “That’s not a strawberry. It’s raw beefsteak.” She put Phisohex on it and gently tried to clean it, but said it needed more. They put my leg in a whirlpool with iodine solution. Wow did that sting. But that was just the prelude. After about 10 minutes a guy had me get my leg out of the whirlpool and set it on a treatment table. Then he took a gauze pad and began scrubbing the raw wound. This was what is sometimes called an enhanced interrogation technique. Unfortunately I had no secrets to give up under torture. I wondered if maybe this guy was just evil and liked seeing me suffer, or maybe he was trying to kill me. I wanted to hit him, but I was too close to passing out from the pain. He said, “I’m sorry. I know this hurts, but we have to get the dirt out of the wound.” I said, “Couldn’t we just amputate the leg?” It was one of the most excruciating things I’ve ever experienced. That leg hurt for a good two weeks after that. I never again wore shorts when playing softball after that. I had learned my lesson. The pain was so fierce I never want to experience anything like that again, and I’ve made sure never to let it happen again.

I’m pretty sure that if I’d been in Paul’s place and had been through a riot or two and had been nearly killed by rocks, beaten and abused, I would have said, “I think

I'd rather not do that again. There's got to be some other way to do this. I'm done with getting my brains beat out." Yet when Paul reached Thessalonica he didn't hesitate. Notice that the passage said he "dared" to proclaim the gospel. That says to me that he felt the threat of opposition. One only has to dare something if there is risk involved. I don't say, "I dared to eat a doughnut this week." That takes no daring because there's no risk involved, unless you want to count the risk of me being taken over by a doughnut addiction and getting as big as the Goodyear blimp. Paul knew the risk he was taking. But he dared to go right ahead regardless of what might happen. Notice 1 Thessalonians 1:6. Paul says the Thessalonians "welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering." If they had severe suffering what do you think Paul and friends had? More of the same. No doubt there was a "here we go again" feeling about the situation, but they never wavered. What courage it took to dare to persevere when they knew it would inevitably bring them more pain.

From Thessalonica Paul went to Athens then to Corinth. There he again he forged ahead and began telling people about Jesus. Acts 18:6 says that some people opposed him and became "abusive." It was starting yet again. Acts 18:9-10 tells us this: "One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision. 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.'" God saw that it was necessary to appear to Paul and encourage him. He had to reassure him. Why? I think Paul had just about reached his limit. He was afraid. He feared being attacked yet again. In other words, Paul wasn't superhuman. He was as intimidated by threats, abuse and opposition as anyone. Despite feeling that he faithfully kept on doing what God had given him to do. To be courageous does not mean that you feel no fear. It means not being defeated by the fear.

1 Corinthians 16:13 says, "Be on your guard, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong." Psalm 31:24 says, "Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord." God wants us to be courageous. We want to be courageous. Only people who have courage have ever made a difference in this world. We all know in our hearts that there is something noble and good and admirable about courage. We want our heroes in our stories to be people of courage, for we could not admire them if they were cowards. There is something godly about courage.

There was an episode of the *Seinfeld* television show that depicted our thoughts about courage. In the episode Jerry's friend George Costanza attends a child's birthday party at the request of his girlfriend, Robin. At one point after speaking to Robin and her mother George goes into the kitchen and discovers smoke. There's a

fire. He yells “Fire! Get out of here.” He runs out of the kitchen in a panic, knocking over the clown who was entertaining the kids, an old lady with a walker, several kids, yelling, “Get out of my way!” After the fire as the firemen are cleaning up and tending the injured, several people accuse George of running over even kids in a mad panic. He insists to the untrained eye it might look that way but that he was actually pushing them to the floor where there’s less smoke and then leading the way out. A fireman says, “How do you live with yourself?” He says, “It’s not easy.” In the final scene George is in a restaurant with Jerry recounting the experience. He says of Robin, “She doesn’t want to see me anymore.” Jerry says, “Did you knock her over too, or just the kids?” George says, “No, her too. And her mother.” “So you feel women and children first in this day and age is somewhat of an antiquated notion?” George says, “To some degree, yeah.” Jerry says, “So basically, it’s every man, woman, child and invalid for themselves.” George says, “In a manner of speaking.” Then he says of Robin, “She should be commending me for treating everyone like equals.” Jerry says, “Perhaps when she’s released from the burn center she’ll see things differently.” No matter what our world might say, we all despise cowardice.

To live as aliens, as different people in this world, God’s people are going to need courage. We will need courage to trust God when the only reasonable thing seems to be to quit believing because it appears that he is not coming through. We need courage to overcome our fears of telling people about our gracious Lord. We need courage to not just blend in, but to be willing to say no to our culture. We need courage to give up self and serve others when our selfish hearts are screaming, “take care of me!” We need courage to not give into the rampant sexuality that is engulfing our culture, especially our young people. We may need courage in the near future to stand for what we believe when our world ridicules us as narrow minded, stupid and bigoted.

Tim Keller recently wrote, “Today, as never before the character of the Bible is publicly attacked as cruel and oppressive, and those who uphold the historic view of its truthfulness are seen in the same light. There is enormous social pressure on Christians to abandon the historic understanding of the inspiration and authority of the Scripture and the role it should play in our lives. In the past people might have disagreed with your view of the Bible, but they wouldn’t usually have felt the need to loudly ridicule your views and shame you for them.” Our world is changing, and it takes courage to stand.

1 Timothy 1:7 tells us that the Spirit of Jesus is not a spirit of timidity and fear, but one of power. This is one aspect of change God is working in our hearts. But this

transformation must involve more than courage. There are people who have shown courage in going against strong enemies in order to do great evil. Notice another aspect of Paul's character.

### PAUL HAD INTEGRITY

Notice how Paul and his friends described their ministry. It did not come from error or impure motives. In other words, they didn't bend the truth to make their message more palatable to more people. They simply proclaimed the truth. This was characteristic of Paul. In 1 Corinthians 2:2 he reminded the Corinthians "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." In verse 4 he said that he did not preach with "wise and persuasive words." The Corinthians had a bit of an inferiority complex. Living in the shadow of Athens, the cradle of philosophers, they wanted to think of themselves as being as philosophically sophisticated as the philosophers of Athens. So being wise sounding and impressive in one's philosophy was a big deal to the Corinthians. The temptation for Paul was to pander to that and to try to wow them with his intellectual brilliance. Instead he chose to proclaim the simple, unadorned gospel of Jesus Christ. He refused to be about trying to impress people with Paul.

Paul and his friends were not trying to gain a following from whom they could extract money. There were a lot of itinerant wannabe philosophers and religious leaders who did just that. The religion business can be good if you are not bothered by scruples. There is a desire in every human being to connect with God. We long for the eternal. And of course all people are trying to manipulate whatever spiritual forces there are out there into working to make their lives better. That means there will always be a healthy market for people who are willing to play to those longings in order to line their own pockets. That was true in the first century and it is true today. Creflo Dollar is a pastor in the Atlanta area who is also on television. Ministry Watch gave his ministry an F grade for financial transparency and accountability. He owns millions of dollars in real estate in Atlanta and the New York area. He owns 2 Rolls Royce autos, and recently after his private jet ran off a runway he began a campaign to get donors to give \$65 million so he could buy a Gulfstream 650, which he says is the fastest jet made for civilian aviation.

Paul and his friends weren't about being popular or getting people to like them. They weren't building their own portfolios. They worked to support themselves so as not to be a burden to those they were trying to reach. In short, I would sum up much of what this passage says about these men and their ministry with the word integrity. They were genuine and honest in all their dealings. The temptation to compromise integrity generally comes about because of one of three things.

### ***Fear***

In the classic movie *A Christmas Story* there is the familiar scene where two boys, Flick and Schwartz, argue about whether if you put your tongue to a metal pole on that freezing winter day it will stick. Of course Flick can't refuse the triple dog dare and does it, ending up with his tongue stuck to the flagpole. All the other kids head back to their classroom when the bell rings. Miss Shields, the teacher, asks where Flick is. Ralphie and his friends have the "Flick? Flick who?" response, feigning ignorance.

They don't want to tell the truth because they fear what will happen to them if they're honest. One of the main reasons kids lie is because they want to avoid the consequences of telling the truth. The same is true of adults. We've already seen that Paul and company faced some fierce opposition and refused to be intimidated. They weren't dumb. They knew the risks they were taking and felt the fear, but they refused to give into the fear.

### ***Greed***

Does anyone in this country ever lie on their tax forms? Of course. We all know it happens a lot. Why? Because people want to keep money from the government. They trade their integrity for a few dollars. Integrity is often the victim of greed. Paul would later write to another Macedonian church, the one in Philippi, and told them he was content with whatever God gave him. He had been through times of plenty and times of total need, and he was content in all of them. He knew that having more stuff could never provide the life he wanted and had found in Jesus Christ.

### ***Desire For Approval***

Notice that Paul and his friends did not try to please people according to verse 4 and they did not seek praise from people (verse 6). They tried to please God. He was their audience.

That desire to win praise and approval from others is something we all feel, and it is a common cause of compromise. Everyone knows how teenagers often compromise because of peer pressure, but we don't grow out of that. Everyone feels it.

That "praise from people" thing can be a serious problem. It leads to all kinds of conflict and headaches in churches, because there are many people vying for leadership who, though they would never admit it, are seeking to prove they are successful or knowledgeable or spiritual. They are looking for praise or approval



from others. When I was in seminary I served for the last half of my schooling as a part time member of the college ministry staff for a huge church. The summer before my last year of school I was given the job of planning and executing social events for the summer. There were a couple hundred students involved in this ministry and they wanted to have at least one event every week. Planning and organizing events brings into play some of my biggest weaknesses. It was one of the more stressful summers of my entire life as I felt like we were on the edge of disaster every week. Two women stepped up and offered to help coordinate food for events where we needed it. That was huge for me. But it did result in one difficult episode. One weekend I was going to be out of town, but our event that week was relatively low on the difficulty scale. It was an ice cream social at the very large home of some members of the church. I delegated getting the ice cream, toppings and dishes to my food coordinators and that was all that was needed. I left town knowing that all was under control. Not so fast there, Myatt. The day I got back into town I received a phone call from one of the women who was coordinating food and she went anabolic on me. She was breathing fire. It turned out that the people at whose home the event occurred decided to help out. I learned that they had put out a spread of food that would be fit for a state dinner at the White House. The students were enthralled, with the result that they ignored all the ice cream. The woman was furious at me because I'd had her go to the trouble of bringing all those supplies and no one cared. I tried to calm her down. I told her I was sorry but that I had nothing to do with that. I explained that the hosts had done that all on their own and that I had never suggested they provide any food at all. The food being there was a complete surprise to me. It didn't matter. She continued to rage at me. I said, "Look, I'm sorry you went to the trouble for nothing, but the whole point was to provide a fun time of fellowship for the kids. I know it was frustrating to do that work for nothing but the main thing that the event was a success, right?" She said, "Not for me," and hung up. So she was serving, taking on a demanding task, but who was she doing it for? She was doing it so people would recognize her hard work. She was doing it for herself. The event wasn't a success for her because she got no praise for her fine efforts. All the attention went to the host family.

Paul and friends demonstrated the only hope against the pull of those temptations. All they cared about was pleasing God. That mattered to them more than anything they were afraid of, more than the approval of humans, and more than any amount of money.

PAUL CARED IN LOVE

Observe how fervently Paul and his friends cared for the Thessalonians. These were people they had just met, yet they cared for them like a nursing mother cares for her child, or like a father cares for his kids. We sang the song "Hosanna" earlier and it includes the words "break my heart for what breaks yours." What breaks the heart of God? It is people! Think of what breaks the heart of a nursing mom or a loving dad. It is that child. One of the things that is beyond explanation is what happens to a parent when a child is born. Suddenly they find their heart has a whole range of love and emotion they never even knew existed. It is simply impossible to express how desperately a mom or dad loves that little infant.

Those are powerful images for me. We are watching that play out in our family now that our first grandchild, Leilani, has arrived and is a month old. What a profound thing it is to watch parents loving a child. Leilani is clearly the most precious child ever born, but she is a baby. That meant the first week of her life at night she was often awake and screaming unless someone was holding her, and sometimes even that didn't help. Which meant that her mom and dad were getting only bits and pieces of sleep. That's gotten better. She sleeps during the night, but a new wrinkle has shown up. She's a noisy sleeper. She grunts and snorts and occasionally lets out a little yelp. She sleeps through it all, but mom and dad don't. She is sleeping in their bedroom because they don't feel she's ready to be in a room all by herself. So they wake up with every little sound, meaning they're awake much of the night. They're exhausted much of the time. But they treat her with the utmost tenderness and love. When they talk about how she makes noise they exhibit no impatience, anger or frustration. They just see her as precious. There was the day when Michael and Carissa were here because they wanted to meet Leilani. We were all at Toby and Anna's home when Toby started changing Leilani's dirty diaper. He had the diaper off, the baby all cleaned up nicely and was just putting on a new one when Leilani cut loose again. He had to start all over, cleaning her up and getting out another new diaper. He got about to the same point when boom! She struck yet again. While he was in the middle of the next one, the fourth one I believe, she fired again. It was Poopageddon, the end of the sanitary world as we know it. By this time he was running out of available diapers and was being overwhelmed by a deluge of the offending stuff. He was running out of wipes and diapers. He called out, "babe, help." Anna had to come in as the closer and pitched the 9th inning. You know, you really have to love someone to do that for them. Taking care of that little child trumps pretty much any other concern, even their own well-being. Anna went through a difficult pregnancy and now is living without sleep. If she wants to go anywhere it requires preparations that rival a major military operation. Her life is totally constrained and dominated by that little girl, and she continually shows tenderness, patience, devotion and kindness to

that little child. She posts precious pictures of her on the Internet because she is so proud of her. And do you know what they get in return? Leilani never says thank you. She never does a single thing to express love back. She just demands that they meet her needs. Every now and then she honors them with a brief smile and all is right in their world.

Paul and his buddies said that was a pretty good picture of how they cared about the Thessalonians, a group of people they had never met before going there. What will our world be like if we care about people like that? How will it impact our relationships if we love our spouses, our parents, our children, our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers, our roommates, our classmates, our teammates, in fact everyone we meet, like that? It would be revolutionary.

Paul and friends were like that because the Spirit of Jesus lived in them. In John 15:12-13 Jesus said, "My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friend." Jesus laid down his life for us. That's what his whole life was about. It was the one thing that controlled all that he did. He came to love us to the point of laying down his life for us. He didn't do it because we deserved it. He didn't say he'd do it as long as we gave him so love back in return. He just loved and died for us. So if the Spirit of Jesus is in a person, what is that person going to be like? That person will be like Jesus, and will love the way Jesus loved. That person will love the way Paul and friends loved the Thessalonians, without regard for the cost to themselves.

## CONCLUSION

That is a marvelous example for us to emulate. Courage, integrity, and true caring. Isn't that what you want? Isn't that the person you want to be? Paul commended the Thessalonians for imitating him. That then is what we must do. Let us aim at being people of courage, integrity and selfless caring. Former pastor and author Ray Pritchard tells of visiting the family graveyard at an antebellum mansion near a town in Alabama. The famous family patriarch was buried there under a tall marker that had a long inscription telling of his accomplishments. But a few feet away was a marker for his son. It had the simple epitaph, "A man of unquestioned integrity." Wouldn't it be great if when that day comes for us they put as our epitaph, "a person of unquestioned courage, integrity and caring"?

But remember this. It's not a cookbook. I chose that as a title because the Bible truly is about how to serve others, but also because it is full of formulas like the recipes in a cookbook. There is no recipe for how to make yourself a better person.

If all we do is grit our teeth and try hard to behave in courageous, honest and caring ways, all we will do is put a nice veneer on darkness. We were watching one of those shows on HGTV, I think it was *Fixer Upper*, where they remodel old homes. In the one we were watching when they took up the floor of the house they discovered the sub flooring was completely rotted out. Animals had been living under the floor and had chewed through studs. The wood was also rotted out. Would you recommend they just lay a nice new wood floor over that and call it good because, after all, no one can see it? That would be disaster. What was needed to go in there clean that all out and put in a whole new subfloor. Following Jesus isn't about looking good, doing some good things that mask what's underneath. It is being changed from the inside out. What can do that is the gospel of grace through Jesus Christ. It is the power of God. Only the grace of God can get rid of the darkness inside us and replace it with light. What we must do is live continually in the grace and Spirit of Christ. The more we are aware of the awesomeness of the grace that God has given us, the more we are gripped by his grace, the more his power will be at work transforming our hearts. We must open our hearts and continually invite God to transform not just our behavior but our very hearts.