

1 Thessalonians 2 (3-4) – The Losers Who Know God

What is winning? And what is losing? Well, how you define those terms depends on what endeavor you are talking about. Like games, or sports. And in some things, winning is not a competition, but a category. Like being a winner at life. So, let's just call this success. And when it comes to being, maturing, and ministering as a Christian, what the world says is success is not necessarily what God says is success. And the visible church often makes the mistake of measuring success the same way the world does, in terms of strength, influence, numbers, and popularity. But what does God say?

How does God define success? Listen to Jeremiah 9:23-24 – *Thus says the LORD: Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me.* God defines success as knowing him. And so, the better you know God, the more successful you are, in God's eyes. And God's eyes are the eyes that really matter.

The Apostle Paul also defined success as knowing God. We read Philippians 3:4-10 earlier this morning, and we'll refer to it again later. There, Paul makes it plain that all he had gained before knowing Jesus was as nothing compared to knowing Jesus. His pedigree, his passion, and his performance had made him the ultimate winner in life. But he realized that all of these were garbage compared to a true, intimate, growing knowledge of God.

And so, he was willing to lose it all, and he actually did lose it all for the sake of Jesus Christ. He realized that if Jesus is God, and Jesus died to save me, then no sacrifice I have to make is too much for him. And in the losing of other things, Paul gained a knowledge of God. He lost in order to win.

As we said in our last message, Paul had an invincible courage, because no matter what he might lose, he was still going to win. Those who are willing to lose for Jesus are the winners in God's eyes. And Paul was teaching the Thessalonians what it means to be a loser who knows God.

For our appeal does not spring from error – When the Apostle Paul says “our”, or “we”, he is referring to himself, Silas, and Timothy. Paul had apparently been accused of teaching falsehood and heresy. This would be the passive idea of error, as in roaming around with no guide. The unbelieving Jews said Paul was wandering from the truth of what we call the Old Testament. It wasn’t true of Paul, who often showed how the OT connected with and confirmed the truths he was teaching (cf. Romans 4 / Galatians 4). Paul wasn’t setting sail into the soil of his own imagination, and making his doctrine up. His NT doctrine was anchored in the OT revelation.

Tragically, many today seem to think that spontaneous means spiritual. And too many people are ignorant of biblical truth. So, they love what sounds new and exciting, even when you can’t find it in the Bible. Or when Bible verses and passages are twisted to say what they don’t mean. Or even when one biblical truth is emphasized in a way that invalidates another biblical truth. That is not truth. That is error. And that wasn’t Paul.

our appeal does not spring from...any attempt to deceive – This would be the actively guiding others with guile. It would be like using bait to snare people into your scheme. Paul’s opponents would have said he was using his message to manipulate people into doing what he wanted. And they were saying that what Paul wanted was to satisfy his sinful passions.

our appeal does not spring from...impurity – This is talking about perversion and uncleanness, like sexual immorality, and greed. This is what the pagan priests were doing. So, since Paul was a Jew, and a former religious leader, he was being accused of being worse than the pagans and their priests. And the Apostle Peter describes the false teachers of that day in that same way, as those who used Christianity as a pretense for perversion, and greed. 2 Peter 2:2 – *many will follow their sensuality*, vs.3 – *And in their greed they will exploit you with false words*, vs.10 – *those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion*, vs.14 – *They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin*, vs.14 – *They have hearts trained in greed*, vs.15 – *loved gain from wrongdoing*, vs.18 – *they entice by sensual passions of the flesh*, vs.19 – *they themselves are slaves of corruption*.

But in vs.5, Paul says this wasn't him – *For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed – God is witness.* Paul wasn't wandering off God's path. He wasn't attempting to deceive people. He wasn't trying to satisfy sinful passions. He was committed to God's truth. And his motive was to please God. That is why he was approved by God.

we have been approved by God – Paul, Silas, and Timothy were not self-appointed ministers. They were not teaching error. And Paul was not simply making this stuff up as he went along and calling that “the anointing”, or “being led by the Spirit.” He wasn't using the gospel as a pretense to make money. And he was not using whatever it took to get the people do what he wanted, and justifying that in the name of God. Rather, Paul, Silas, and Timothy had been tested by God, and proven by God, and so sealed with God's approval. Paul's many trials as a minister of the gospel demonstrated his genuineness as a guardian of the gospel. His bold action, despite what happened to him in Philippi (vs.2), was an example of this tested and proven steadfastness. It was not popularity that demonstrated God's approval of him. It was suffering persecution and continued perseverance that demonstrated God's approval of him.

2 Corinthians 10:18 – *For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.* Hebrews 5:4 – *And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.* The Christian minister is not a priest, like Aaron. But all ministers should be God-called people, and not people who simply push themselves into the ministry.

to be entrusted with the gospel – Paul knew his role. 1 Timothy 1:11 – *in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.* Titus 1:3 – *and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior.* Paul's method was to love people (vs.7-9, 11-12) by speaking the truth, living the truth, and not using the truth for his own ends. His method came from his message and his motive. He knows God gave him the mission to spread the message of the gospel. So, his motive was to please God.

so we speak, not to please man, but to please God – Paul’s method was to love people. But loving them didn’t mean he simply gave the people what they wanted. He didn’t love them by redefining terms, compromising truth in the name of pastoral care, and going along to get along. Paul’s mission wasn’t pragmatic. His motive wasn’t to achieve popularity. His mission was spreading and living the gospel. And his motive was pleasing God.

Galatians 1:10 – *For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.* Did you notice that Paul said, “If I were still trying to please man”? You see, you have to learn to be a purposeful God pleaser. It isn’t automatic. Paul loved people by telling the truth, living the truth, and trying to help people mature and endure in the truth. And Paul knew that God knew, tested, proved, molded and matured Paul’s heart.

God who tests our hearts – This is how the call of God is discerned. God examines a person’s motives and exposes those motives to that person so that the person will see their own heart (cf. Psalm 19:12-14). To see if you will allow failure, persecution, slander, and trouble. And really, to show you how willing you are to lose whatever it takes for his sake. Failure is often the price of pleasing God. Think about it. In their lifetimes, and even today, people have said that John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Apostle Paul were failures.

Christianity is a means of identity. But it is not a means of self-esteem. Yes, obedience to God can and will bring blessings. But Christianity is not a means to success in the way that the world defines it, and some in the visible church define it. Yes, there are true, godly ministers, who are popular, influential, and successful. And there are true, godly ministers, who aren’t popular, influential, and successful. And there are other ministers who are popular, influential, and successful, but who aren’t godly in their motives.

God testing and proving and approving you is not about God figuring out what you’re really all about. It is about God showing you what you’re really all about. And then molding you and maturing you into what he wants you

to be. A jar of clay that is willing to be broken and vulnerable, willing to keep being molded and matured, that demonstrates the power and worth of Jesus in and through your life. In losing and in winning, a model of what it means to be molded, maturing, and enduring. Are you willing to lose, in order to know God, and please God? That's the only way you're going to win in God's eyes. And those are the eyes that truly matter.

Paul knew that even church people often fail to see what the issue of godly success really is. 2 Corinthians 5:12 – *We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.*

The Apostle Paul defined success as knowing God. And he said that what it takes to know God is to fail, to lose, in order to win. Think of Philippians 3:4-10. There, Paul was discussing his pedigree, his passion, and his performance before he knew Christ. And he lost them all. But it is not as if these things in your life don't matter at all, or that you have to lose them all. It is that they are subservient to what is most important, which is a true, intimate, growing knowledge of God. In the losing of other things, Paul gained a knowledge of God. Listen to Paul, writing from a jail cell, in Philippians 4:12-13 – *I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

It isn't that you have to be beaten, burdened, bare, and broke. But would you be willing to? Are you willing to let God search your heart, and show it to you? What sin are you willing to lose? Are you willing to let God mold you, by losing some of the things that you want, in order to be and do what you think he has called you to be and do? Are you willing to let your dream die for the dream of God? Are you willing to lose? And will you worship God when you do? Because that's the measure of your maturity, and the test of whether or not you can be made ready for mature and enduring ministry. Paul, Silas, and Timothy were ready, willing, and able. They had nothing to prove, because God had proved them. They were losers who knew God.