A Church with Integrity

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[0:00] If you've got a Bible, you can go to the New Testament book of 1 Thessalonians. I'm going to be in the second chapter this morning.

If I can just, while you're turning there, add my commendation to that of Kirsten's for tonight's Sunday seminar on atonement. This is a big part of kind of Christian theology. How do we get right with God?
What exactly are the mechanisms that are taking place when Jesus dies on the cross? We say in the Creed every time he died for our sins, but like what does that mean and how do we figure it out? How do we understand that? And Christians have discussed this and debated it for centuries and it's really an important subject that we want to try and get more and more clarity on and so Roland's going to try and walk us through what is sometimes quite a tricky field of study.
But join us this evening for that at five o'clock in the room next door here. 1 Thessalonians 2 and the first 12 verses. This is the Apostle Paul writing and he says this.
[1:04] He says, You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. We had previously suffered and had been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition.

For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.
We're not trying to please people, but God who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed. God is our witness.
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. Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, 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.
[2:11] 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.

You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous, and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.
This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we study this part of scripture together. Let's pray. Merciful God, won't you teach us this morning?
Won't you show us the truth of your word? Won't you help us to see your character? Won't you help us to see your plan of salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ? And won't you help us to respond appropriately, not in our human souls, but by the spirit in us, prompting us towards faith and holiness?
And we ask for these outcomes by your power, for Christ's sake. Amen. So we're in the second part of our series, Go to Church, is the title of the series.
[3:29] And in this series, we've been asking this question, what should I be looking for in a church? If I'm going to go to church, what should I be looking for in a church? Many today, I think it's pretty clear, want a spiritually active life of some sorts.

They want to even be connected to Jesus. But they have misgivings about the church as an institution. Sometimes those misgivings come from a negative experience of church, of them being in church.
Sometimes it comes from a negative perception, rightly or wrongly, of church, or what church is exactly. And so in this series, what we're trying to do is we're trying to build confidence in the

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church. And we say, hey, this is something worth investing in.
This is something worth thinking about. And it's important that we think about what kind of church we want to be. And hopefully answer that question, what should I be looking for in a church? Now, last week, we said the first thing you should want is you want a church where the gospel is central. That was last week's sermon. This week, I want to make the case that you should want a church with integrity. A church with integrity. You see, I don't think it's pretty hard to make a case that trust and integrity, transparency is a key thing that people want from churches, from really any institutions today.
[4:50] I think maybe that's probably in our minds and our thoughts, having just gone through voting season, thinking about trust and integrity in public institutions. We're so very, very, very tired of a lack of transparency.

And it's especially true when it comes to the church. Our sort of newer, younger generations are particularly attracted to this, or what we might call authenticity. Over a decade ago now, there's an online Christian youth culture magazine called Relevant Magazine.
And they had an article with these words in it. Authentic community, authentic faith, and authentic Jesus are the cry of the new generation. We don't want to be fooled anymore.
We don't want to be gullible anymore. We want to be us with people that don't pretend to be something they aren't. Just add water relationships, plastic pastas, and immaculate images have induced gag reflexes.
We want flawed. We want imperfect. We want real. Now, that particular article was aimed at millennials. So I did a little bit of a search around because I figured, like, well, some of the millennials are starting to get a little bit long in the tooth now already.
[6:00] And I could find very, very similar articles written and aimed at Gen Z. And then I went way back, way, way back, and I could find very similar articles with the same kind of language written to Gen Xs.

Basically all saying the same thing. So every generation wants this. Every generation wants authenticity. It's not like just when you're young you want authenticity and then you get old like me and you're like, you couldn't care anymore.
Everybody wants authenticity. Especially in our faith. We want that honesty. We want that integrity. We're afraid of people selling us something that's not real.
Now, this brings us to our book Thessalonians that we're studying. Remember, Paul writes this to a very young church. Church that he helped to plant. But then a church that he had to leave very soon after he had planted it because of persecution in the city.
And so some people in first century Thessalonica had suggested now to this new bunch of Christians, this fledgling little infant church, that, hey, the reason Paul and his buddies left so quickly is because they were fakes.
[7:13] It's because they were charlatans. They were peddling some sort of spiritual message for financial gain or some other kind of gain. There was a hidden motive there. And so as soon as the heat was turned up with this persecution, they just upped and left you guys.

They weren't authentic. They lacked integrity. And so what Paul does is he writes the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians mainly to counter that claim and to establish his honesty and his integrity.
And he makes a claim that the church that he established in Thessalonica when he planted it was an honest, transparent church. There were no hidden motives, no alternative agenda, an authentic church in the very fullest sense of the word.
So I want you to see two characteristics of a church with integrity and the type of people that would make up that sort of a church because you're the people sitting here.
You're the people that are trying to aspire to these things. But a church with integrity is number one, transparent. And number two, gentle. Transparent and gentle.
[8:18] So here's the first one, transparent. Have a look at the first six verses. Paul says, So there in verse 2, Paul says, In spite of persecution, in spite of this hardship, we dared to tell you the gospel.

We dared to tell you the good news of Jesus Christ. We've talked about that a little bit from last week, that we are alienated from God, that in one sense we're under wrath, and we need to repent and turn away from that and put our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, what he did for us on the cross.

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Paul says we dared to, even in the face of severe persecution, to not do that. We dared to tell you that message. Now then from verse 3, Paul seems to counter this false information that's now coming to the Thessalonians.
And he says, basically, to summarize, he says, look, I know things have got out of control. And there was strong opposition. But you've got to know, guys, that we weren't trying to trick you with this message.
There was no hidden agenda. There was no ulterior motive. We didn't mask anything. We didn't cover up anything. We didn't want your praise. We didn't butter you up with special language or anything like that.
[10:07] We tried to be as transparent as we possibly could. We took the mask off with you. I think there are few things in our culture today that we despise more and yet are simultaneously complicit in than the masking of society.

People and institutions putting up veneers to cover the truth that's underneath. I don't quite qualify as youth culture anymore. But I have.
Nobody was like, no, Stephen. That's not true. But I have plunged headfirst into the single biggest cultural innovation that has arisen in the last 25 years, two and a half decades.
And that is social media. So I have or have had any number of these things, a Facebook account, a Twitter or an X account, an Instagram account, a LinkedIn account.
I used to have a blog when blogging was big. In fact, if you dig deep enough, I'm not sure if there's a way you can actually do this, maybe through Wayback Machine or something like that. You might be able to find a MySpace profile back there somewhere.
[11:17] Some of you are like, what is MySpace? MySpace. The only thing I don't have is a TikTok account because there's nobody in the world who wants to see me dance. Now, in some ways, I've really appreciated social media.

It's had some benefits for me, connecting me to people. But it's also probably one of the main tools that we use to mask ourselves in society, to put on a veneer.
And we knew this about this technology pretty early on. And we're not just sort of discovering this now, 25 years down the track. So back in 2013, there was an article entitled, Why Social Media Isn't Social.
This was written by a Columbia legal graduate. And they said, have you ever noticed that the lives of your ostensibly boring friends always seem way more interesting on social media sites?
And that's because these sites and apps allow us to choose an impressive filter for our lives, making boring, exceptional, and mediocre exciting. And thus, we spend our lives keeping up with the virtual Benjamins, creating an online persona that really looks anything like us.
[12:23] A cybernetic facelift, if you will. We create an image of a certain type of person, someone who is smart and funny and witty, has good taste, fun friends, an interesting life.

Someone who doesn't just live life, but lives a grand life. We experience the world and we do it while looking fabulous. We're a generation and really now successive generations that are deeply complicit in masking ourselves.
And yet, at the same time, we hate that everything is masked. We hate that we have to second-guess people. We hate that we can't completely trust institutions. We hate fakery.
So we create and we hate the mask at the same time. If you're looking for a church with integrity, then what you're looking for, really, is a church that sort of tries to at least break out of that conflict. Break out of that cycle. Paul says, we didn't mask anything with you. We didn't hide anything. And how do we know that he didn't hide anything? We look down at the second half of verse 8.
[13:29] Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well. So Paul and his companions didn't just share that biblical gospel message, which is so important.

We looked at that last week. But they shared their lives as well. That is, they lived transparently before this group in Thessalonica. The church, they got to look into the life of Paul.
They got to look into the life of his companions. They got to see whether or not the message that they're preaching accords with how they're living. Now think about that for a second.
Think about that for church for a second. Because this is a big one. And it rests fairly squarely on those of us who would consider ourselves to be part of church.

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Or who would want to participate in church. And that is, well, how well do our lives accord with the message that we preach? That we adhere to? A lot of people in our city are put off by Christians because they feel that a lot of the time Christians don't live like the Christ that they claim to follow. [14:39] We just did those outreach sermons in the evening over the last two weeks. And we've done a lot of what would be called apologetics over the years in this church. Making a case for the credibility of the Christian faith.

If you say, well, what is the hardest topic to speak about when you do apologetics? Is it like speaking about science and faith or the historicity of the resurrection or the gospels or evil and suffering like we did last time?
I would say the hardest, especially when it gets to the Q&A section afterwards, is the issue of hypocrisy in Christians. Both present day and historically, things that the church has done under the name of the banner of Christ.
So that's a big deal. People know that. People see that. People feel that. And so they're like, well, sometimes it feels to me that Christians, their lives don't accord with the message that they preach. That's one thing to think about.
But even if you're already in the church, so you kind of manage to get past that hurdle and say, well, I'm still going to give this church a go. I suspect you still feel something of this because you don't want to fake your own spirituality. In fact, we're so afraid, I think, sometimes of faking holiness or spirituality that we've almost started to honor failure and sin and then label that authenticity. [15:56] I'm just being real, guys. Brett McCracken is a Christian journalist who's written for the Wall Street Journal and for CNN.

Not you, Brett. Don't worry. And he's also the author of a book called Hipster Christianity. In an article on the church's quest for authenticity, he wrote this once.
He said, in recent years, Christianity has made its imperfection a point of emphasis. Books were published with titles like Messy Spirituality, God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People, or Death by Church.
And Jesus Wants to Save Christians. And churches have popped up with names like Scum of the Earth. That's a great one. A salvage yard. Evangelicals have made films like Lord Save Us from Your Followers.
They've written blog posts with titles like Dirty, Rotten, Messy Christians. Maintained websites like AnchoredMess.com, ModernReject.com, ChurchMarketingSucks.com, RecoveringEvangelical.com.
[16:56] Christianity, both on the individual and the institutional level, is trying hard to purge itself of a polished veneer that smacked of hypocrisy.

But by focusing on brokenness as proof of our realness and authenticity, have Christians turned being screwed up into a badge of honor?
See, this is actually the easy way out. If we can't live up to the moral and the ethical demands of Jesus, of the New Testament, if we can't, like Paul, point to the transparency of our lives as proof of the authenticity of the gospel message that we preach, well then let's just lower the bar.
Rather than fake spirituality, let's just lower the bar. So sure, I'll just be transparent then. My life's a mess. I'm useless at following Jesus. I don't really read the Bible. I don't really pray on Sundays when we sing songs.
I'm basically just thinking about lunch all the time. And then there are many days when I wonder if Jesus is real at all. There, I'm being real. I'm being authentic. I'm being transparent. Now, I'm not saying that we shouldn't be brutally honest about our struggles.
[18:09] We should. But I do think Paul is calling here for a transparency that commends the gospel. Not a transparency that makes it look like the gospel doesn't actually work.

Now, you might hear that and say, okay, but if I try and live like Paul, I'll feel like I'm faking. Because I know my heart isn't always true. I know my zeal isn't always at its mountain peak when I come into church on a Sunday morning. Won't I just be faking? It's easier to wear failure than as an honor badge than to pursue genuine, authentic, holy, transparent living.
But here, I think we need to check definitions. What do we mean? Definitions of authenticity and faking it need to be checked here. There's a theology professor by the name of Eric Tunis who teaches at a college in Los Angeles.

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He does this little exercise with this class each year with his new class. He asks him to write down two things they love about society and two things that they hate about society. One answer, he says, comes up over and over and over again that people write down that they hate about society, and that is fake people.
[19:27] But then he goes on and he messes with them a little bit and he says, Do you know that Christianity involves a fair bit of faking it on the path to maturity? He says this, he writes this, he says, There's this idea that to live out of conformity with how I feel is hypocrisy.

But that's a wrong definition of hypocrisy. To live out of conformity to what I believe is hypocrisy. To live in conformity with what I believe in spite of what I feel isn't hypocrisy, it's integrity.
You see that? It's really important that we get this definition right. A lot of our failure to live transparent lives is rooted in the sense that you have to be constantly feeling all sorts of warm fuzzies towards Jesus all of the time in your heart before you start pursuing holiness and spiritual discipline in your life.
And only when kind of those warm fuzzies neatly align up with your pursuit of holiness and spiritual discipline, well then you're being authentic. And I want to say, friends, that is nonsense.
And it's not authentic because it lacks integrity. Integrity is to conform yourself to what you say you believe, not what you feel necessarily.
[20:48] So for example, that sometimes means singing praise out to God when your heart is full of despair. Because you believe that God is inherently worthy of all praise.

That sometimes means opening your mouth in prayer when all of the circumstances around you in your life are screaming at you saying God is not listening.
But you open your mouth in prayer because you believe that God hears the prayers of his children.
That sometimes means tangibly loving your spouse even when they're not returning that affection because you believe that Christian marriage involves loving your spouse as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.
That's integrity. That's authenticity. That's the transparent life that we need to live for a watching world.
I think if we could cultivate a church, a community that grows in that, then we will have people who can, with full sincerity and integrity, say what Paul says in verse 10.
[21:58] He says, Now that is quite a statement. Almost makes us blush at the thought of having that on our own lips, right?

You want to say that this morning? You want to stand up and say that? Anybody? You are witnesses and so is God of our holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.
But that's what we're looking for in the church.
That's what we're aiming for. That's what we're moving towards. Don't always feel that way, but we're moving towards that. And just to close on this point here, while I do think this is a call for all of us to create an honest and transparent church, I do think this burden falls in a special way on leaders.
to especially model this transparency. So elders, deacons, Bible study leaders, worship leaders, people who exercise various levels of responsibility and authority in the church.
We're going to be able to model this. The church with integrity is a transparent church. Here's the second thing. The church with integrity is also a gentle church.
[23:14] So look at verse 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.

Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, 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.
In some ways, if you read that passage, particularly in the NIV translation, or even in some of the other translations, it can look a little bit odd, because Paul seems to be on the one hand saying we were like babes, as some of the translations, or young children among you.
And then in the next sentence, he says we were like a nursing mother with you. And you're like, Paul, you're confused. You can't be both of those things. You're either one or the other. Like who's who in this illustration? You can't be both.
Those two sentences are one sentence in the original Greek language. And so I think, and there's a bunch of commentators who go this way, and I think it makes the most sense. I think what he's

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saying is this.
[24:19] We were like a nursing mother who condescends to her child and behaves like a baby. So kind of like if you'd come into my house 11 odd years ago in the afternoon, my son was one years old.

After work one afternoon, you came and found me. You'd find me on the floor, speaking a weird language, goo-goo-ga-ga, playing in a weird way with my child in a way that I wouldn't interact with any of you.
That, I think, is the kind of image that's going on here. Paul is saying we gently, affectionately, compassionately, and caringly accommodated ourselves to you.
We've met you where you're at. A church with integrity is a church where people are accommodated, where we meet people in their hour of need, where we meet them where they're at. We don't wait for broken, bruised, battered people to jump through all sorts of holiness hoops before they get our attention.
We give our attention in the moment. We reach out. We accommodate. See, so as much as I, in the previous point, want to warn against using your failure and your brokenness as a sort of badge of honor, look how messed up I am, I do, at the same time, very much want you to feel like you can bring your failure and your brokenness to the church, and the church will meet you there.
[25:54] Not necessarily in judgment and condemnation, but in compassion and affection and care and love. Kind of like the creed we professed this morning in the Westminster Confession of Faith, our commitment to the saints.

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher from the 19th century. I was actually reading a little bit about him again this morning, and he died when he was 42, which made me feel really dumb and stupid.
I'm 45, and I've got nothing to contribute that is as meaningful like this. But he was speaking about masks once, and he said this. He said, don't you know that at a midnight hour, sorry, don't you know that a midnight hour comes?
When everyone has to take off his mask. Do you think life always lets itself be trifled with? Do you think you can sneak off a little before midnight to escape this?
You see, when midnight does come, when the mask comes off, where will you turn? When tragedy or failure pries the mask off of your face, whose arms are you going to run into at that point?
[27:08] God's arms are his church. And if you want to be a part of the church, will you be those arms when the masks come off around you?

And they will. Spend enough time with people, masks come off all the time. And do you know why we can turn to the church in the midnight hour? Do you know why we as the church should be ready with open arms in the midnight hour?
Well, it's because the church is this very unique institution that is founded by and birthed out of a God who is completely transparent and gentle with us.
John's gospel, on the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus is in the upper room with his disciples. He's about to go to the cross.
And he says to them, he says, I'm going away. Which is a reference to his death. He cryptically ends that little section by saying, you know the way to where I am going.
[28:11] And Thomas says to him, Lord, we don't know where you're going, so how can we know the way? And Jesus answers with these famous words, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Then he says this, if you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.
You see, in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we see the Father. We see God. That's what he's saying. We see God. So you want to know what God is like?
You want God to be transparent with you. You want him to share his life with you. What he did. In Jesus, he did. Jesus is God being transparent with us.
He doesn't stand aloof from us. He doesn't stand at a distance and order us around with sort of religious rules and regulations. He becomes transparent.
[29:08] He shares his life with us. Takes on flesh. He comes and he lives with us in the person of Jesus. And so there's a very real sense in which Jesus is transparency.

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Jesus is the creator God of the universe bearing all before us. And then we get to see God. We get to see who he is. We get to see him close up like the Thessalonians got to see Paul.
And what is that we see? Well, we see a man who is without sin. We see a man with compassion. We see a man who heals the broken. We see a man who includes the outcast.
We see a man who lifts up the downtrodden. We see God with us. It's an ultimate act of transparency. We see. And then this transparent God is, he's so gentle with us.
He's so very, very tender with you and with me. He doesn't wait for us to clean ourselves up. Make ourselves presentable before him. He doesn't wait for us to rid ourselves of all of our sin before he comes and he meets us.
[30:15] He meets us where we're at. But in our sin, in our disobedience, in our brokenness, in our failure, Jesus goes to the cross and he meets us there. Paul says, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

He didn't die for us once we were sanctified. He didn't die for us once we had cleaned ourselves up. He died for us when we were filthy. While we were still sinners. While we were still sinners, in our greatest moment of need, our midnight hour, mask completely off, bearing all of our ugliness, he comes and is so very gentle and tender with us.
Friend, if you are not in the church this morning, and I don't mean that you're not in the building because you clearly are in the building.
But if you're not in the church, that is, you're not a believer in our Lord Jesus Christ. You're not sure what you think about Christianity. You're still exploring. You haven't turned away from a life of sin and turned in trust to Jesus.
If you're not in the church, you need that transparent, gentle Lord to be your Lord. Because where else, where else in this entire world will you be able to truly take off the mask and still be accepted?
[31:48] Where else? What other institutions are going to give you that? Part of the reason that we're so afraid to join a church and be vulnerable is because we're so afraid of people seeing below the mask. Seeing what's actually there.

And yet we know that we desperately need that intimate community. We can't just live isolated island kinds of lives. Well, the church is the only community where the entrance is, where entrance into that community is predicated on the founder, our Lord Jesus Christ, seeing right behind the mask, seeing absolutely everything, and then lovingly accepting you no matter what he sees there. What other community on this planet has that as the entrance exam? There's no other community like that. There's no other community like that.
To strengthen you and encourage you and equip you so that you will be God's arms for all those people around you when their masks come off. You can't carry all those burdens yourself.
We as a group of people can't carry the burdens of just this group of people by ourselves. but when we behold Christ God being transparent with us God being gentle with us in our hour of need well then we can find the strength we can find the ability we can find the courage to be the arms of God when the masks are coming off around us let's pray that God would make us that church our Father and our King we really do want integrity in a world where integrity seems to be in such short supply we ask that you would be kind to us as a church that we'd be a church where integrity is found not because we're perfect but because we have trusted in the God of all integrity the God who has saved us from our failure to show integrity Father we thank you for Jesus we thank you for your transparency to us in Christ we thank you for your gentleness with us and saving us from our sin when we so desperately needed it we pray that that would drive and govern the way in which we practice integrity now as a church and I pray for any person whose jury is out on Jesus this morning
[34:36] Lord I pray that you would show them that they really can't get what the gospel offers anywhere else true acceptance no matter who they are and what they've done if they will just simply repent and trust in Christ and so I pray that they might do that this morning Lord grow us in this area we pray and we ask this for Christ's sake and his glory Amen Amen Amen

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