

2 Thessalonians 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Thessalonians chapter 3 Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness, and not in accord with the tradition that you receive from us.

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it. But with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.

It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command, if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busy bodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.

[1 : 32] Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all. I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine. It is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. The third and final chapter of 2 Thessalonians begins with a request for prayer.

In 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 25, Paul had also requested prayer. And now he gives more detail of what he wants prayer for. He speaks of the word of the Lord as if it were a runner.

And he asks them to pray for its swift movement. He wants them to pray that it might be honoured and glorified everywhere, as it was and is among them. The word of the Lord is the message of the reign of Christ and Paul wishes to see it recognised and received for the glorious message that it is. He further asks for prayer for deliverance from the opponents they will face. The gospel has its fierce enemies, as Paul himself once was, and they need to be rescued from their schemes.

[2 : 38] Not everyone may have faith, but the Lord is faithful. And Paul expresses his assurance that the Lord will strengthen and guard the Thessalonians from the assaults of Satan.

Paul is confident in the Lord and his faithfulness. And that confidence means that he is assured that the Lord will keep the Thessalonians in obedience to their instructions as his messengers. He also expresses a wish in the form of a prayer, that their hearts would be directed to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ.

God's love and Christ's steadfastness protect our hearts in times of uncertainty and struggle. They provide a firm and secure stronghold for us. They give us peace and calm in our hearts and in our minds, when so much that is going on around us might unsettle or shake us.

The unchanging character of Christ and the deep and unwavering love of God mean that even in the chaos of the world, our hearts can be at rest, as our fundamental standing is unchangeable.

In 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verses 9 to 12, Paul had already given instructions concerning church members who were idle and lazily dependent upon others. Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.

[3 : 53] For that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you brothers to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders, and be dependent on no one.

This sort of behaviour is clearly a problem in the Thessalonian community, as Paul returns to the matter again here, addressing both the church as a whole, and the particular troublemaking members.

Paul speaks of a tradition that the Thessalonians received from Paul and his fellow missionaries. The tradition in view here is not a teaching so much as a form of practice. Paul and his companions did not only give words of instruction, but also set a pattern of behaviour for the Thessalonians to follow.

Although the missionaries would have been within their rights to request financial support from the Thessalonians, to whom they were ministering at the time, they forwent that right in order to provide a necessary example.

The able person who resisted working should not be supported in their indolence. That person should not eat. The model of diligence provided by Paul and the missionaries shows up the failure of those who walk in idleness.

[5 : 06] Those not busy at work find other people's business to get involved in, and make a nuisance of themselves. They undermine rather than building up the church. This isn't just less than ideal behaviour.

It is something to be dealt with in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is disorderly. It is also something that brings dishonour to the church. The ideal is that people do their work quietly, rather than being lazy busybodies, and that they earn their own living, rather than depending upon others. The virtues that Paul celebrates here are not the flashy virtues. They're virtues like working diligently, avoiding lazy dependency, earning your own living, and paying your way, living a quiet life, and patiently doing good.

We often imagine the Christian church progressing through more radical and attention-grabbing virtues, but this largely isn't the case. The letter to Diognetus, a second-century description of Christians, speaks of them as follows.

Christians are indistinguishable from other men, either by nationality, language, or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life.

[6 : 15] Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by the curiosity of men. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human doctrine. With regard to dress, food, and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.

And yet, there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries, as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labour under all the disabilities of aliens.

Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them.

They share their meals, but not their wives. Christians' lives ought to be quietly remarkable. Paul charges the Thessalonians to recognise those among them, who resist the instruction of the missionaries.

While not treating them as enemies, they should distance themselves from them, so that they might be ashamed and reform their conduct, and so that their poor behaviour might be seen for the departure from the true pattern of Christian discipleship that it is.

[7 : 19] The conclusion of the epistle has similar elements to the conclusion of 1 Thessalonians, most obviously the final statement, but verse 16 is also similar to 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 23.

The peace that Paul declares in the benediction might also answer to the unsettling feelings that they had about the possible arrival of the day of the Lord. Paul also stresses here the fact that the greeting is written with his own hand, rather than using an amanuensis.

Similar statements can be found in 1 Corinthians 16, verse 21, and Galatians 6, verse 11. However, in Romans 16, verse 22, we have the words of an amanuensis.

Having Paul's own concluding greeting in his own hand as authentication, the apostolic authority with which the original letter came would be more evident. It would also help to avoid the problem of letters falsely purporting to be from Paul and his companions, a problem that was illustrated in chapter 2, verse 2.

A question to consider, what are some other quiet and unassuming virtues that should mark the Christian?