

2nd Thessalonians Chapter 3

[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Hello, today's talk is the last in our short series on Paul's second epistle to the Thessalonians, and we are looking at chapter 3.

I want to read initially the first 5 verses of the chapter. All our readings today will be from the New King James Version of the Scriptures unless otherwise stated.

“Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you, and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, both that you do and will do the things that we command you. Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ.”

By way of a reminder, according to Acts chapter 17, Paul only had ever visited Thessalonica once, and he established a church there after he left Philippi. It was therefore the second Christian church in Europe. They had learned very quickly and dedicated themselves to the work of the Gospel. However, they had also very quickly been taken in by false teachers. The second letter to the Thessalonians was written very soon after the first letter, and they both deal with the same themes. It is also worth noticing the difference from his two letters to the Corinthians, which dealt with moral error, whereas the Thessalonian letters dealt with doctrinal error. And, as we go through chapter 3, we will see the difference in how these things were handled by Paul.

So firstly, we get this wonderfully simple yet very profound request, “Pray for us.” These were new believers who needed to be taught and strengthened in the faith and yet the great apostle Paul valued and requested their prayers. Surely someone of his standing would request help from the most knowledgeable, and experienced of his own contemporaries? But no, this great man of God addresses his request to the whole church at Thessalonica with the complete assurance that God will hear, and answer the faithful prayers of the very weakest, and the very strongest of His people in equal measure. This is surely therefore a great encouragement and challenge to each and every one of us. None of us is too good or too strong that we don't need the prayers of others, and none of us is so insignificant that we cannot make a difference. I have just recently returned from a wonderful time at the Keswick Convention and, as you go around the various exhibitors of the outreach charities represented, there is one request that they all have in common, and that is for us to pray for the work.

In respect of Paul's prayer request there is another important thing to notice. It is firstly for the work of the Gospel and then secondly for Paul's personal safety. In relation to the work, they must have fully embraced the word of the Gospel, as he stated that they should pray that the word would run and be glorified as it had done with them, what a commendation! Perhaps we should all

challenge ourselves as to whether the apostle Paul would say the same of our local church fellowship. Would it be apparent to anyone coming into our gatherings that the word of the Lord was running swiftly and being glorified?

Then secondly, he wanted them to pray for his own personal safety and the other evangelists, as they moved around preaching the word. I am not sure about you, but when we think of the extreme persecution that faced the Church at that time, I think my own personal safety might have been uppermost in my mind and therefore first on my prayer request list. In chapter 18 of Acts, we read about those who were annoyed with Paul's preaching and the fact that many people, some prominent Jews amongst them, were being converted to Christ. Although Paul was assured by the Lord in a night vision that he would be safe in Corinth during that period he would be, nonetheless, naturally concerned as just 2 chapters earlier (in Acts chapter 16) we read about Paul and Silas being beaten and thrown into the innermost prison at Philippi. He had a very real balance between his own safety and the importance of the preaching of the Gospel. All over the world today, there are Christians who are being persecuted for their faith. Perhaps we in the UK, who have been blessed for so many years by favourable laws, which allow the free preaching of the Gospel, should prepare ourselves that this might not always be the case. We live in a nation where there is an increasing turning away from the things of God; and where freedom of speech is being gradually eroded. We should be wise and discerning of the many things which the enemy uses to thwart the truth.

In verse 3, we get a very short and simple enough expression, but one that reaches far further than we may at first appreciate, "But, the Lord is faithful." In various scriptures we get that God is faithful in regard to creation, His promises, salvation, temptation and suffering. Faithfulness is one of the nine aspects of the fruit of the Spirit that are detailed in Galatians chapter 5. How many problems of life are caused by unfaithfulness in all its different aspects? It is an attribute of God and something we ourselves should live out. So how reassuring it is to read here that the faithfulness of God also comes into play, strengthening and guarding His people against the evil one, Satan.

It is with this encouragement, and in contrast to the men we read about in verse 2 that Paul can then tell the Thessalonians that he has confidence in the Lord that they will do, and will continue to do, the things he commands. It is worth noticing that he doesn't say he has confidence in them but rather confidence in the Lord concerning them. That makes all the difference. Paul tells the Philippians, in chapter 4 verse 13 of his epistle to them, that he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him. We live in a day where "self" seems to be at the top of a lot of people's agenda. We do well to keep in mind that in Christ we can achieve so much but in ourselves very little, irrespective of how much we might seem to achieve by the world's measures.

With these thoughts in his mind the apostle, in verse 5, gives a lovely benediction to them. What better desire could he have for them that they be brought into, and enjoy, the love of God; and that the patience of Christ may mark them. Surely we, like them, will be better equipped to deal with every aspect of life if these things are always before us. The first verse of a hymn we often sing says;

"May the mind of Christ my Saviour
Live in me from day to day
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say."

K.B. Wilkinson (1859 - 1928)

From verse 6, right through to verse 15, there is a very direct and forceful warning to the Thessalonians. It is important to notice that verse 6 starts with the clause, "But we command you." The apostle's words come with the full weight and authority of the inspired Word of God. The Holy

Spirit of God is speaking the Word of God through the pen of His servant, and we have no choice as to whether we accept it or not. We should always be willing to accept the counsel and guidance of godly believers who have our best interests at heart, but we can never be commanded by them. But what we have here is different. This is not just guidance, this is the truth of God, because it's the Word of God.

The Bible is the complete Word of God. It is simply incorrect to say the Bible contains the Word of God or that the Bible is part of the Word of God, for both statements fall short of the actual reality. So, we confidently know that the Bible we have in our hands is God's last word and, thankfully, it is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, as we read in Hebrews chapter 4. There is nothing in the Bible which is not the Word of God; and there is nothing that is not in the Bible which can be considered to be the Word of God. In a day of much confusion with conflicting voices and opinions this fills us with great confidence and comfort. However, it doesn't diminish the issue that some of the commands of Scripture are hard to receive; and what is stated in these verses is no different.

Some among the Thessalonians had been teaching things about the Lord's second coming that had confused some of them and had turned them aside from the ordinary business of life and service. On one hand in 1 Thessalonians, they were confused about those who had already died before the Lord comes; and on the other hand, in 2 Thessalonians, that the day of the Lord had already arrived. Paul had already addressed these concerns but now he is addressing the practical impact that holding such false beliefs can cause. There is an old saying that is worth remembering: 'What I think about today, I will believe tomorrow, and I will act on the day after!' So what they were believing (incorrectly) about the Lord's coming was making them idle and, in that idleness, they were becoming busybodies. My old Gran used to always say that the devil will find work for idle hands and that is exactly true here. Paul makes it very clear what he thinks about this and calls it walking disorderly.

He tells the Thessalonian Christians that they must have nothing to do with such people and disassociate from them. I mentioned earlier about the comparison with the situation he addressed in his first epistle to the Corinthians, where one man was known to be involved in sexual immorality that was well known and obvious to everyone. The instruction to the Church in Corinth was that, because the offender was unwilling to cease from his erroneous ways, he was to be put out of the company, excommunicated if you like. There does not appear to be such a command here to the Thessalonians, but rather a plea for them to see Paul and his co-workers as examples as to how they should live. To lead and to be led by example is a wonderful thing and Paul could not be clearer in his desire that this should be the case here.

In verses 7 to 9 Paul reminds them that while he, Silvanus, and Timothy laboured with them, they also worked in order to provide for themselves so as not to be a financial burden on the Thessalonians, even though there was scriptural authority for them to do so. The Old Testament was very clear that those who served God on behalf of the people should be looked after, but Paul was more than happy to work with his hands as a tent-maker while still labouring in the Gospel among the people. This really did appear to be full time work, for verse 8 tells us that they worked with labour and toil night and day. What an example this must have been to the people and so, when this particular problem had to be dealt with, what better way to address it than to bring to the Thessalonians' attention the example that the apostle himself had been. Of course, whether in his pastoral, teaching or his tent-making work he would always be engaged in the spread of the Gospel in one way or another. So while we should be using our employers' time for the purposes we are being paid for, this should always be done in a conscientious way that will give a good example of what we Christians should be. We should be always very much aware that whatever we do, we do as unto the Lord. Verse 9 therefore gives us a very clear example of who our own work ethic should be modelled on.

These verses then set up a very straight and perhaps seemingly harsh statement in verse 10, “If anyone will not work, neither shall (they) eat.” It is important to notice that it is “will not work” that is used and not “cannot work.” It is at the very heart of Christianity to support those who are weak, but in order to do that, those who are able need to be willing to do what they can. The wonderful social security system that we enjoy in the UK can only work efficiently if everybody does their bit, and not just simply have the view of taking what they can. How much more in the smaller church setting we can only be effective to those less fortunate if there exists a correct attitude of sharing what we have and doing what we can.

The Thessalonian situation described in verse 11 was even worse. Not only were some not prepared to work but that idleness brought about unnecessary meddling in other people’s affairs. Being a busybody is not something a believer in the Lord Jesus should ever be. We can all conjure up the image of a busybody. It is not something the Lord ever was for He was sinless, and we can therefore never imagine Paul or the other apostles ever being one either. Likewise, think of the great men and women who have served God in the past. From what we know of them, there is nothing to suggest that this term could ever be labelled on them. What about great men and women of faith that you have known personally? If they have made an impact in their families, churches, and communities for the Lord, I suspect that “busybody” is not a word you would use about them either!

Yet, do I seek to know something about someone else to tell somebody else more than to bring them before the throne of grace? Would I gloat or criticise in someone’s fall from grace rather than on bended knee bring them before the throne of grace? In that wonderful chapter on the attributes of love in chapter 13 of 1st Corinthians we read that love does not rejoice in iniquity, it is kind and suffers long. In Peter’s first epistle chapter 4 verse 8 we also read that love covers a multitude of sins. This doesn’t mean ignore them, but rather keep them out of sight of those who don’t need to know. These thoughts of Christian compassion and care cannot be manifested if a busybody is at work. Yes, we are to be concerned prayerfully in the lives of our brothers and sisters in the Lord, but we are not to meddle in their affairs; and while this can perhaps seem to be a fine line of difference, we should always be very cautious never to cross it.

In verse 12 then, we have a very direct word to those who were still disobedient. It’s almost as though Paul is saying, ‘You know who you are, and you should settle down and apply a discipline to work such as perhaps you have never done before.’ Then in verses 13-15 he addressed the others who had responded positively to his teaching. He didn’t want them to be despondent nor for the attitudes of those who were lazy to rub off on the rest. There is nothing worse in any work environment, whether secular or spiritual, if someone feels that someone else is not doing what they should be doing and therefore they withdraw their effort as well. This can soon spread and expand and will ruin any endeavour. So those who are doing good must continue to do so, but they are to identify those who do not obey and not have unrestrained fellowship with such people. Again this can be tricky. It doesn’t mean we just ignore those people, perhaps cross the road if we see them coming or avoid them at the back of the church. Verse 15 is clear that we are to admonish them as a brother or a sister, not count them as an enemy. So in the same way that a father chastises his son in love for his son’s benefit (just as we are taught that God our heavenly Father deals with us at times), so this ‘lack of fellowship’ is designed so that they can see the error of their ways, feel the coldness of being out-with the circle of Christian fellowship, and repent from their ways. Full fellowship can then be restored, and all will then benefit once again from everyone pulling together for their mutual gain. Again as already mentioned, not completely put out of the Christian company as was the case in first Corinthians chapter 5, but withdrawn from, in order that the coldness of lack of full fellowship may bring about the required change of heart and behaviour.

Having spoken about these difficult things that can easily lead to strife and dissention, Paul brings the epistle to a lovely end with these words, “Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way.” In a very much lesser way, I think of examples of this as being like someone

saying to me, if I was having trouble with the electrics in my car, that they would send someone who is an expert in cars' electrics to come and help, or an expert greenkeeper coming to see what is wrong with your grass. How much greater then for these dear saints to know that the One who is the very author of peace, of whom peace is an inextricable part of His eternal character, and from whom only true peace can come, is going to be with them and give them that peace! The old hymn says,

“When peace like a river attendeth my ways,
when sorrows like sea billows roll,
whatever my lot You have taught me to know,
‘It is well, it is well with my soul.’”

Horatio G. Spafford (1828 - 1888)

What comfort Paul's words must have brought to their anxious hearts in difficult times and that same comfort is available to us today. It is also worth noticing that the apostle desires this peace for them “always (and) in every way.” At every time of the day, in every action that we undertake, in every thought that we have, and in every word we say, is how this little phrase appeals to me, as the Lord Himself said that we should be anxious for nothing.

In verse 17 we get the apostle's stamp of authentication on this letter. If we buy gold, or silver, or something very precious, it will have a mark on it to show that it is real. Here we have exactly this so that his readers will know this is not a counterfeit, but the words of the Apostle Paul as directed by the Holy Spirit of God and therefore the real deal.

There seems no better way to finish off this talk than by reading the very last verse with you, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.”

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on 2nd Thessalonians chapter 3, talk number T1276 and I trust the message has been a real encouragement and a challenge to us all.

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