

2 Thessalonians 3

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Most writers, if they're working in a particular genre, will fall into a particular pattern of writing. This is certainly true of the sermons that I write. As you've doubtless noticed, they typically begin with an introduction about 350 words long, have a discussion of Scripture that examines about 8 verses in approximately 1800 words, and have a conclusion/invitation that I generally deliver without a script. That's basically what my standard sermon looks like.

In just the same way, when we look at the writing of the apostle Paul, we see that his epistles often follow a pattern too. He starts off by addressing some overall theme. In Romans, it's God's plan of salvation; in Galatians, it's the difference between the works of the Law and the grace of Christ. Then, once he says his piece about the main theme, he will conclude the epistle with a number of unrelated bullet points about practical Christian living.

Our study of 2 Thessalonians has now gotten to the bullet-point stage. We've already seen everything that Paul wanted to reveal about the day of the Lord, the man of lawlessness, and so on, and now, Paul has some thoughts he wants to share that will help the Thessalonians get to heaven. That's what we see in the last chapter of the book.

In some ways, it's these closing bullet points that are the most helpful and the most practical for us today too. After all, we may not have much trouble with whatever false doctrine Paul is dealing with for the first several chapters. Those tips on daily Christian living, though, typically deal with issues that are common to Christians in all places and all times. For instance, today we still need to know how we can most usefully direct our prayers. We still need instruction in how to deal with lazy and undisciplined men, whether inside or outside the church, who will not work. We also need to know how to treat brethren who refuse to live according to God's law. We find all these things in 2 Thessalonians 3.

Prayers and God's Work.

In our study of Paul's writing, we often come across little stream-of-consciousness prayers that he offers for those to whom he is writing. What we see first in 2 Thessalonians 3, though, are actually **PAUL'S REQUESTS FOR PRAYERS**. Look with me at 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2. In this segment of Scripture, he's requesting the Thessalonians' prayers in two main areas. He wants them to pray that the gospel will have the same kind of success wherever he goes that it had in Thessalonica, and he wants them to pray that he will again be rescued from the wicked opponents of the gospel, just like he was in Thessalonica. He knows that the gospel will inevitably create enemies as well as friends.

From this, we can draw two lessons. First of all, notice that this is Paul seeking the prayers of others on his own behalf—Paul, the apostle, one of God's own chosen servants. Despite his significance in the kingdom, he still wanted more help for himself than his own prayers could generate. Friends, if Paul needed the prayers of others, we need the prayers of others too. Whenever I see Christians who want to keep their illnesses or other struggles secret from their brethren, that always baffles me. Don't they want God's help? Don't they want the blessing that only the prayers of the faithful can provide? Let's be wise about that. Let's be honest about our needs so we can have others praying for us.

Second, this teaches us how important it is to pray for the spread of the gospel. I'm here to tell you, friends—in my own work here, without God's help, I am surely doomed to failure. I need all of you praying for me so that I can receive that help, so that we can continue to prosper and grow as we have been. Likewise, if we are looking to study with someone, we ought to be praying about it. That's the kind of prayer that wins souls for the kingdom.

From there, Paul shifts to an examination of **GOD AND THE THESSALONIANS**. We see this in 2 Thessalonians 3:3-5. There's a logical progression to the ideas in this section. Paul begins by commenting on the faithfulness of God, that He is sure to do all the things that are necessary to confirm them in the faith and protect them from the devil. However, that by itself doesn't guarantee that they will make it to heaven. They themselves must continue to obey the commandments of God. That's why we see the second-to-last prayer in 2 Thessalonians right here. Paul wants them to love God and to remain committed to following Christ, so that they can claim their eternal reward.

This balance between our commitment and God's help is just as important today. It's easy for us to upset that balance in either direction. On the one hand, we can decide that our works are enough to save us by themselves, and, while we pay lip service to the idea of grace, we are secretly confident that God will receive us into His heavenly kingdom because we're pretty good people. On the other hand, we can get so caught up in relying on God's grace that we don't do anything for ourselves. We just sit there and wait for God to make us better people. Neither one of those beliefs are useful or true. Instead, we need to do what the word instructs—work out our own salvation while still trusting in God.

Idleness.

After this, Paul begins what is actually the main discussion of the chapter, a discussion of **IDLENESS**. We see the summary statement for this discussion in 2 Thessalonians 3:6. For whatever reason, apparently the Thessalonian

church had a big problem with people who weren't willing to work. Some have speculated that there was a segment in the church that was so convinced that the Lord was going to return tomorrow that they didn't see any point in working today. It could also be that a number of the new Christians there heard from Paul that Christians were supposed to care for one another, so they thought they could just use their brethren for a meal ticket. Regardless, they weren't working.

From there, Paul reminds his audience that according to the traditions he had taught them, that Christians were supposed to work. These traditions could have been passed on in sermons while he was still in Thessalonica, or he could be referring to the commandments to work that we read today in 1 Thessalonians 4. If someone rejected those traditions, the other brethren were to keep away from them. As we continue, we'll be looking at both of these ideas in greater detail.

This idle lifestyle that some of the Thessalonians were walking in was in direct opposition to **PAUL'S EXAMPLE**. Paul describes his own behavior in 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9. Here, Paul points out one of the unusual characteristics of his ministry. In this discussion, he affirms the principle that we also see in 1 Corinthians 9, that those who spend their lives preaching the gospel have the right to get their living from the gospel. This doesn't mean that some lazy preacher who gets his sermons off the Internet every Saturday night should expect to be fully supported. However, the man who works hard in proclaiming the word can expect the church to provide for him and his family.

Paul had the right to that provision too, but he chose not to use it. Instead, he spent the time that he wasn't preaching working to support himself. Obviously, he didn't have to spend the time on sermon preparation that I do because he could just wait for the Holy Spirit to tell him what to say, but this was still no easy task. It's a task that he assumed, though, to teach the Thessalonians how they should behave. If Paul preached the gospel and worked night and day, then surely the men who weren't preachers could find the time and energy to work to support themselves.

Now that Paul has established his own position, he tells the Thessalonians **WHAT TO DO**. We find these instructions in 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12. First, he repeats what has been God's law from the beginning: that if a man is not willing to work, he should not eat. This is no less true for us than it was true for Adam and his sons in the days of Genesis. Obviously, there are exceptions to the rule. Sometimes, a man is so incapacitated by illness or injury that he cannot work. At other times, he is willing to work but can't find a job. However, if he can work but just doesn't want to, he should not be supported in his idleness and laziness. A church member who won't work should not receive handouts from the church, and an adult child who won't work should not be provided for by his parents. Even though it might seem compassionate to help out the undeserving and lazy, confirming them in their laziness actually helps nobody.

Likewise, Paul tells us that we have a responsibility to work to support ourselves. If we can, we must. Not only does this keep us from being a burden to others, but it also helps us morally. When we devote ourselves to honest work, we develop the self-discipline and character that are essential to attaining eternal life. This is true whether we serve as a hardworking business owner, a hardworking employee, or a hardworking homemaker. Second, work prevents us from becoming busybodies. There are only so many hours in the day. When we fill those hours with productivity, we don't have the time left over to get involved in everybody else's business and become gossips. In addition to that, there are all kinds of other sins that overtake the idle. Let's guard against those in our lives through work.

However, when a Christian refuses to obey God's commandments, whether about idleness or any other subject, that raises the unpleasant but necessary topic of **CHURCH DISCIPLINE**. Paul explores this idea in 2 Thessalonians 3:13-15. As he says here, his words apply to those who do not obey, and we learn elsewhere in Scripture what it takes to become disobedient. According to Jesus in Matthew 18, for a brother to reach this point, he has to be practicing sin, and remain steadfastly in that sin despite warnings from other Christians singly, in groups, and as a whole congregation. Once someone reaches that point, though, the brethren are to have nothing to do with him socially, so that he will become ashamed. Obviously, for this shaming treatment to work, there has to be a relationship between the sinful brother and the other members of the congregation. If we didn't talk to him before he was withdrawn from, and we still aren't talking to him now that he has been withdrawn from, he's not going to be able to tell the difference.

However, even though we're to cut off this kind of social interaction, the sinner doesn't become our enemy. We don't withdraw from people because we hate them. We withdraw from them because we love them, and that love should still be evident in the way we treat them. We can't still be all buddy-buddy with them and act like nothing's wrong, but we should take every opportunity we can find to reach out to them in love and persuade them to come back.

Closing Remarks.

This takes us, then, to Paul's **CLOSING REMARKS** in the epistle. They appear in 2 Thessalonians 3:16-18. Paul knows that carrying out this command to withdraw from the idle isn't going to be a pleasant experience for the church, even though it's a necessary one. That's why he asks that in the middle of that conflict, that the God of peace will still grant them peace. In our troubles today, this blessing of heavenly peace and is still just as important.

Finally, we see Paul's own certificate of authenticity at the end of the letter. Apparently, Paul dictated most of his letters rather than writing them out himself, but he signed each one to establish the genuineness of his authorship.