

2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 June 2019

Preacher: Bing Nieh

[0 : 00] Our scripture reading today is from 2 Thessalonians chapter 3 verses 6 through 18 and can be found on page 1093 of the White Church Bibles.

Now we command you brothers and sisters 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 received 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 neighbor 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.

[1 : 19] As for you brothers and sisters 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.

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 the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Well, it is a joy to be together this morning.

Thank you for being here early. We will do our best. We have planned an abbreviated service.

[2 : 29] So it is for me to do my part in abbreviating as well. Let me pray for us as we make our way.

Father, we come to your word which has been passed down. Which the apostles saw and testified and others received and transmitted and handed down from generation to generation.

And we come to it this morning as recipients of the divine word. These are not the mere meanderings of people or thoughts of clever men or myths or fables.

But these are the living and active words of God. And so would it be at work in our lives this morning? We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. How does a congregation fail?

Or put otherwise, what leads to the demise of a gathering such as this? It's arguably not a single event.

[3 : 42] More likely it's to be a sequence of events. There are surely challenges that come from the outside. We have seen this in this brief letter.

In this emerging congregation in the city of Thessalonica. Possibly seven or eight years old at the time of the composition of this letter. It was being battered from the outside.

They were recipients of persecution because of their faith. They were enduring afflictions. We see that in chapter one. They were shaken and troubled because they had received a forged letter that seemingly appeared to be from Paul and had duped them into false belief.

They tried to be a holy people when lawlessness reigned. There were certain external threats to their endurance and their preservation or persistence.

You see, the collapse of institutions, modern day and establishments, aren't only affected by external threats. They are likewise threatened from within. While recently dining at a local

establishment, I observed that there was a presence of armed security outside the place.
[5 : 02] But there were also security cameras that were directed outwards. The hope was, the owner's hope was that he was taking precaution against external threats.

Yet above each register, there was a directional camera pointed straight down at the cash register. They were possibly there to capture potential robbers, but they were certainly positioned to deter employees from performing an inside job.

There is an understanding that threats are external as well as internal. Even for those who employ themselves in military service in this country, they pledge an oath that goes something like, I, so-and-so, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, whether they be outside or inside.

And we come to the conclusion of this letter, and Paul has given much thought and much direction regarding the external challenges and threats the church faces.

Now he turns to the reality and the possibility of an inside job. Paul wants us to know that the church can undo herself from within.

[6 : 40] The church can undo herself from within. Our text makes it quite clear that Paul is concerned with an inside threat.

His command is directed to brothers. You see that in verse 6. Brothers, in relationship to other brothers. Again in verse 6.

Brothers, once again, is mentioned in verse 13. And in 15. Though the translation we read from denotes it to be gender specific, the Greek is better translated to read brothers and sisters. Paul is concerned about the inner relationship within the faith family. And the family dynamics for the church at Thessalonica were off.

And they needed to be addressed and corrected. The community of faith is being violated. And there are rules that need to be enforced in order to preserve its health and keep its ongoing witness.

[7 : 42] There was a failure at the church. And it needed to be addressed. I wrestled with how to break up this passage. I think I've decided to break it up in two.

Resulting in two headings. The first is this. There are commands to obey. And there is a peace that continues. Commands to obey.

Verses 6 to 15. And a peace that continues. Verses 16, 17, and 18. Commands to obey. Up to this point, this short letter has been filled with words of encouragement.

Prayers for comfort. And prayers to grasp the love of God in the believers' lives. It's been filled with theological instruction. That's been aimed at the mind.

Presuming that when one thinks rightly, they may somehow persist in faith. Yet you and I know this to be true. The Christian life does not only reside in the head and take shape in the heart.

[8 : 44] It is manifest in action. We can, with our heads, think like Christians. We can, in our hearts, feel like Christians. However, Paul wants to establish that with our hands, we must act and behave like Christians.

In verses 6 to 15, Paul delicately addresses action in the church. There is an issue that has arisen that Paul must confront. And he calls the church to obedience.

The term to note is the word command. You see it. It's introduced in last week's passage in verse 4. It's brought up again in verse 6.

Then again in verse 10. And then finally in verse 12. Paul is exercising his apostolic authority and laying down an ethical principle or code or law for the early church.

These commands are not simply given by Paul. They're actually given in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. These are not suggestions or Paul's preferences.

[9 : 55] The text reads in such a way that these are divine directives. God orders or commands this. There are commands given.

And there's particularly two commands given to two segments of the congregation. The first is commands regarding the company you keep.

The company you keep. You see in verse 6. 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 received from us.

It's quite striking that within the congregation, within the gathering such as this, Paul is saying, there are people you stay away from.

There are people you stay away from. And you and I go, yeah, of course. There's some people I don't like. There's some people I don't get along with. And before we run to these conclusions that there's subjective feelings that cause us to keep away from certain individuals, Paul clarifies what is taking place.

[11 : 21] He says there's people you must stand aloof from to keep distance from, not mingle with. Why? Well, this is the word.

It's translated idleness in our text. Idleness. We stay away from idle people. Now for you and I, that goes, that you and I probably run to immediately think of, oh, people who are unmotivated or slothful or lazy.

Actually, the word carries more meaning than just that. It's used, it expresses a sense of insubordination, disorder, unruliness.

It's a picture of a military soldier who is out of line with established code of conduct. In some historical sources, such as the Septuagint, the term is referred to, refers to a disorderly mob that is rushing about into a city.

Philo, a first century Jewish philosopher, uses the term to refer to the chaos that preceded creation when God brought everything to order.

[12 : 36] Josephus, a Jewish historian, uses the same term to describe a disorderly military retreat. All that to say, when we look at the word idleness in our text, it carries a sense of disruptive disorder that is out of line.

It goes beyond the cultural presumption that it is simply laziness, though it could be part of it. The question that we must ask is, why were they choosing to act in such a way?

Why were their congregants in the congregation acting in such a way? Well, to be honest, it doesn't seem like anyone knows for sure, but there's at least three suggestions.

The first is this. Having received Paul's first letter to say that Jesus is coming, people were saying, well, if Jesus is coming, no need to work.

He's coming. Nothing really matters. Let's just lay everything down and go about our day with no urgency to work. A second proposal has been, there were some among them, the congregation, that were emerging as teachers or emerging into this apostolic strand of teaching or authority.

[13 : 50] And as a result, they were profiting and capitalizing on their positions of power. They were in some sense freeloading and living off the hard work of other congregants.

And Paul uses this personal example to undermine them. He's saying, no, I being an apostle, when I was among you, I chose to work.

I chose to labor night and day so that I might not be a burden to you. Thirdly, another possibility is, culturally, there was a relationship that happened in the Greco-Roman world that was a patron and a client.

And so, a patron was someone in high power, well-resourced, wealthy, and they would have clients that really lived under their wealth that provided for them.

And in return, the patron's status in the city was elevated. They were prestigious. They were noteworthy. And some say that this cultural practice found its way into the church.

[15 : 00] And though we're unsure of exactly what the motivation was of this behavior, evidently, it was taking a toll on the congregation. The behavior was becoming a burden.

We see that hinted at in verse 8. It's burdensome. It saps the church. And if it continues, it may lead to the demise of the congregation.

The dynamic that was being manifested in the congregation proved to be in a segment of the community that was consuming the church's shared resources. And depleting its health.

You see, the congregation was a generous one. The first chapter we saw, it was an exceedingly loving community. It was a community that lavished generously on one another.

And as a result, there were those in the congregation that began to capitalize or exploit this generosity. The Didache, an early Christian document that tried to provide practical guidelines to the faith community, notes that this was a challenge in the early church.

[16 : 08] It's interesting. When the church received travelers, people who are passing through, it writes this, when one settles in their midst, they are to exercise their craft or to work for their bread.

If the person has no craft or is unable to work, some provision must be made that will prevent this individual from living in idleness. The church has warned that if such a person refuses to work, and I quote, he is making merchandise of Christ.

Beware of such people. We shouldn't misread the text. The indictment was not on the unemployed, the charges against those who are unwilling.

They were evidently employed, but unwilling to do the work. These are those who simply were saying, I don't want to work. Hence the command, if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. Additionally, they are not only choosing not to work, they are busy bodies. They are busy about being busy bodies. You see the indictment in verse 11.

[17 : 24] They were not only refusing to work, but they were becoming work for others. They were becoming work for others. When these people should be doing work, they were causing more work.

My kids aren't in the congregation right now. So, fathering, you want to instruct your young children how to gather things together, or clean up, or to keep the house in order, or to have some responsibility.

And oftentimes, I will commission my children to go do something. Go do something. And as a result, usually the do something is, can you go clean up?

Please. Pretty please. Now. Hurry. And oftentimes, the result is when they are commissioned or sent out or tasked to do work, they often do the other side of it, cause more work.

Bring about more mess, disarray, things like that. And there's a sense that what is taking place is when these people are commissioned for work, they're actually causing more work for others.

[18 : 44] There are those who are meddling in the business of others. There were those who interfered in the life of others. That's why the hint in verse 12 is given. They are encouraged to work quietly.

They really caused too much noise. They brought too much noise. And as a result, the rebellious idlers were becoming a growing burden to the congregation and a disruptive distraction to the life of the congregation.

So Paul commands the congregation to avoid these people in verse 6. He repeats himself in verse 14. Take note of such a person and have nothing to do with them.

Yet it's not a total abandonment. The act of avoidance is to serve as a warning to the brother. It is to bring shame upon the individual that would lead to their repentance and their restoration into the community.

This past week, I initiated two phone calls to two dear friends of mine who have both recently have had to make the hard decision of ending their congregations.

[19 : 50] Both have been launching congregations in two different neighborhoods in this city. Both were approaching five years. One actually exceeded five years. And they made the tough decision to dissolve their congregations.

So I phoned them and I asked the very difficult question that I know they have thought about quite a bit. I asked them, what happened? What happened?

Interestingly, neither of them said it was an external threat that did them in. It was not intense persecution. They were not confronted with hostility. It was an errant teaching from the outside. Rather, nearly everything they mentioned bubbled up from the inside. I jotted down a list of about 12 things that they mentioned between the two of them.

The reasons range from simple explanations of people relocating and leaving the church to moral failure and the leadership of the church and the trauma a congregation goes through. But what did it all boil down to?

[20 : 56] And it was captured in one phrase that one of them said. He said this. We had a lot of spectators showing up on Sunday.

And I asked him to unpack what he meant by that. And I interpreted it as this. Many came to watch. Few came to work. Many came to watch. And few came to work. You see, there's an economic model at work in the church's interdependency. The reality is that when there are many consumers and few contributors, the church begins its decline.

And you see that. You see that taking shape in Thessalonica. There are people who love the church. Who are well-resourced and generous. Whether hosting meals, offering hospitality, taking people in.

And over time, their generosity begins to be exploited. They become victims of their generosity. And Paul needs to address it.

[22 : 07] And so he does. He calls the church to avoid such people. Well, we see that.

There's commands regarding the company you keep. And secondly, there's commands regarding the character with which you work. It's into that. Paul charges the rebellious idlers to do their work quietly in verse 12.

He gives instructions on how they are to work quietly. It begs the question, were these individuals, people who disliked what they did, they hated work, and so they made it known to everyone that they hate what they do?

Were they being verbally abrasive and destructive in their speech? It's interesting that if you flip one or two pages over into 1 Timothy, the same similar phenomenon is addressed to the church at Ephesus.

When Paul writes to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5, verse 13, he warns them of the same issue that's emerging in that congregation as well.

[23 : 19] That there were young widows in the congregation who were becoming idlers, going from house to house, not only as idlers, but also gossips and busybodies saying what they should not.

And so you begin to piece these things together, that these busybodies are not only not doing the work they should be doing and causing work for others, but they were running off their mouths in some way.

In Ephesus, it was through gossip and saying what they should not. And it isn't difficult to think that this was happening in Thessalonica as well. And so you have this command to this segment of the congregation, these rebellious idlers, we encourage you to work quietly and to earn your living.

Though verse 13 is not a command, it commends the Thessalonians not to grow weary in doing good. Certainly Paul sensed it. There's an undercurrent that's bubbling, a possible frustration.

A number of people are bearing the majority of the communal load. They were being discouraged by the idlers. They were possibly being disheartened from doing good. They were possibly being disheartened by the counterproductive cycle of, wow, I'm doing all this.

[24 : 41] I'm pouring into all this. And I'm being taken advantage of. That's why Paul anticipates their thinking and says, do not grow weary of doing good.

They are, as the call to worship summoned us to do, to be steadfast and movable, always abounding, the work of the Lord. Paul is saying, do not be disheartened or discouraged.

Continue in generosity. Persist in your charity. And so in this text, we see a sequence of commands. Commands to obey. Stay away from the disorderly.

Stay away from those who have abandoned the apostolic tradition. Some need to work quietly and to earn their living. Don't grow weary of doing good. It's an incredibly delicate situation.

It's a really fragile ecosystem. How are we to apply this today? I certainly don't carry the same apostolic weight as the Apostle Paul.

[25 : 45] But I do think it's my place to challenge us. To take, to make a personal assessment. It doesn't take too much of a line, imagination, to draw a line between Thessalonica and Hyde Park.

What takes place in the gathering of believers is one of interdependency. We are tethered together as one faith family. As a result, our participation in the life of what goes on not only in this building, but outside this building with one another affects one another.

In our recent staff meeting, we were casting a vision of what we want to see take place in 10 years. And we came upon this, this bizarre metaphor, but it is a working one.

Imagine all of us are in a boat. We're in a giant boat. It's a very primitive boat because there's no motor and no sails. But you're given an oar. You're given an oar.

What are you doing with your oar? For some, it may be resting in your lap. For others, you might be having an oar fight on the deck.

[27 : 09] Some may be paddling in the wrong direction. And there are those who are driving their oar deep in the water and pushing and pulling with all their might. Are we spectators or participants?

Are we burdensome or burden-bearing? Are we toiling and laboring? Or are we unwilling and undesiring?

It's actually a very pointed application. We need to assess ourselves. Well, commands are given.

Commands to obey. And secondly, much briefly, much more brief, peace to continue. The situation at Thessalonica is delicate and fragile. They are not only dealing with intimate human relationships, they're dealing with the faith family.

It translates into maybe a personal family of sorts. Two grown siblings that do not get along. Ideologically, behaviorally, relationally, it's awkward, uncomfortable, and tense.

[28 : 23] Family meals and family get-togethers are just ugh. And that's what's going on in the congregation. And therefore, Paul's prayer in verse 16 makes good sense.

The need is for peace to take hold and to continue. Yet this is not a peace only for the present circumstance, but every circumstance. You see it.

It's a prayer that peace would persist at all times and in every way. It's a comprehensive peace.

See, Paul was not omniscient. He didn't know what the church would face in the days ahead.

He didn't know if the persecutions and afflictions would continue and even intensify. He didn't know that if they would be additionally shaken or troubled or alarmed by wayward letters and doctrines.

He didn't know how they would fall victim of the persistent lawlessness that he mentions in chapter 2. He didn't know if people would walk out of the congregation.

[29 : 25] Like, after implementing this type of discipline. Paul didn't know what was coming, but he knew that the Lord would be with them. When Paul couldn't be there, he reminded them that the Lord of peace would be there with them.

A peace that continues. And he wraps up this letter in verse 17. And he says, well, let me just demonstrate my authenticity. that you guys received a forgery, but this is real.

This is a real letter. Paul wanted to provide the Thessalonians with peace of mind that this letter was truly from him. See, it's, in these days, actually for Paul himself, it was not unusual for him to use an ancient secretary of sorts to write his letters.

That they would assist him in writing his documents. This is what appears is happening here in verse 17. He takes the pen at verse 17 from this secretary and he says, this is my handwriting as a sign of my, this, the authenticity of this text.

The Thessalonians likely had some other form of a letter that was from him that they can compare and validate the authenticity. It's not unusual in Pauline letters. You see it at the end of Romans where Paul says, Tertius is the guy who penned it.

[30 : 52] But it's a letter from Paul. In letters like 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, and Philemon, he exercises the same thing that this is me writing.

This is me writing. And so you begin to see as this letter closes, as we close off the final New Testament book preached at Holy Trinity, you know, after 21 years.

As it closes, I can't help but connect this closing passage with what preceded it last week. You remember last week, Paul prays a prayer for the church.

He asks, he prays a prayer for the church, but he also asks for prayer from the church. And Paul says that he's really confident about them in chapter 3, verse 4.

That they will do and are doing and will do the things that he commands. And it's almost as to say this, that Paul's, when Paul asks for prayer, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored.

[32 : 05] honored. I almost wonder if Paul is connecting the dots to say this, that as the people of God obey the word of God, it speeds ahead.

It's honored. That when the word of God is obeyed, the word of God is honored. honored. God's word is honored when it is obeyed.

And I, though disarray may happen in a faith community and it may dampen the ability of a gospel community, what Paul is trying to remind us is as we obey the word of the Lord, it will run in haste before us.

Paul is not saying the church should not be a refuge for those in distress. Paul is saying that the church cannot be a place where deliberate disorder reigns. The issue is not whether or not we should clean up the mess.

The answer is absolutely. Yet in Thessalonica it seemed that there were some in the community who were creating the mess and relying on others to clean it up. And the Christian life is one that's lived under commands.

[33 : 28] Now, when I talk to these two church planners who dissolve their congregation it's interesting what one of them said to me.

He said, Bing, we champion grace. We're always about grace. We tell everyone about grace and God receives everyone but we're so fearful to say God asks you or even commands you to do something.

and as he reflected on his congregation he said I should have said more because his congregation got wayward.

They started saying, oh, the sin is okay, right? Oh, grace is so good and it is but the sin is so bad and the commandments are given to get rid of the sin.

Yes, it's a grace filled life that we champion but there are commands given that we must obey and these commands at least for the Thessalonians pertain to the company they keep and the character with which they work and so in conclusion as we give ourselves to the obedience of the word perhaps we will find that the gospel will speed ahead.

[34 : 54] May we be a congregation that not only receives great grace but lives under serious obedience in honor to the word.

let us pray Father we thank you for this time together and as we as this letter closes we're reminded that we are your body we are tethered we are bought by the blood tethered together by the work of Christ and Lord we pray that we would lift one another up that we would persist in doing good not grow weary not lose heart or be faint knowing that our labors are not in vain and so may we ask the question are we just watching or are we willing to pick up our oar and do something with it and so help us to this end may we be a congregation that thrives not because we're so capable or able but may we be a congregation that thrives because we are obedient help us to this end we pray these things for

Jesus sake amen didn't didn't