

Praying for the Lord's Message to be Spread

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[0 : 00] Please take a seat. If you'd like to open your Bibles please back to 2 Thessalonians chapter 3. I was going to be preaching for two weeks on this but the first section was so small I know it would have been a short sermon, that could have been good but we're going to do the whole chapter today.

And I hope that you'll see as we go through the passage that titles they put in Bibles often aren't right and they're not actually in the Bible.

And warning against idleness isn't really what the passage is about. It might look like it at first glance but it's more about church discipline and that's what we'll be talking about today.

And church discipline is I think a cringeworthy subject. What comes to my mind, I can't remember where I've seen it but on TV or movies I remember seeing things where you see the sort of tight-knit cultish church group with the authoritarian dictatorial church leader and everyone rigidly obeys the leader and one of the members at some stage in the TV program or movie gets exposed to the wider world and no longer wants to toe the line and rigidly obey the leader and the leader's angry with them for that, gets other people in the church on side and then there's the showdown in the final confrontation where the members kicked out of church and you see the church members maybe in a circle in a powerful scene one by one folding their arms, turning their backs on the member as the member is now dead to them and they send them out off into the world outside the church.

And I don't know about you but that sort of thing makes me cringe to see that sort of cultish behaviour in a church. It's sort of horrifying to an extent and I presume that that sort of thing would make you feel uncomfortable as well.

[1 : 57] Nevertheless, church discipline is the subject of today's passage so we need to look at what it does actually mean. What do you do with members of the church who won't obey what the Bible says?

Do you have to be sort of like a cult group where you fold your arms and turn your backs on them one by one and if that sounds a bit silly and that's not what you do, what do you actually do then with church discipline?

Well, stay tuned and hopefully the passage will answer it for us. Might not like the answer but it will be there. Well, if you look at verse 1, let's start at the beginning. Paul starts the chapter with the word finally to tell us that he's finishing up his letter and he has prayed for the Thessalonian Christians and now he asks them to pray for him.

He says, finally brothers and sisters pray for us. And that's an important thing to spot in Paul's letter that he's into mutual prayer support. He prays for them but he also wants them to pray for him and tells them what he wants prayer for.

And we should of course then follow that example. Not only should we be asking our fellow Christians, what can we pray for you? But we should also be specifically saying, can you please pray for me for this or that or whatever it is.

[3 : 16] And what does Paul ask for prayer for here? Well, I'm sure there's all sorts of things that he probably had on his mind. He and the Thessalonians were suffering and being persecuted.

We know that Paul suffered sickness at different points. There were various difficulties and concerns he had. He must have had a lot on his mind. But what he asks prayer for is evangelism. He asks prayer for the spread of the gospel.

Not that it would have been wrong to pray for those other things as well. But first and foremost, that is what he wants prayer for. So he says, verse 1, pray for us so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere just as it is among you.

You might have picked up in the children's talk. Literally, it's actually he prays, may the word of the Lord run, which is why we had the runners. But what he does mean is what it says here, that it will progress forward.

It would spread rapidly. Paul wants the gospel to make rapid progress amongst as many people as possible. And as it does so, he wants the gospel to be glorified, to be honoured, to be received and accepted as it was amongst the Thessalonians when they heard it and believed it.

[4 : 30] And so that's Paul's driving passion and concern that the gospel would spread and as many people as possible would hear it and accept and believe it.

Is that your first concern when you pray? That the gospel be honoured and spread? I think if we understand Jesus' death on the cross, that he has died, paid for our sins and the sins of others, we're rescued from hell, given forgiveness of our sins and eternal life through his death on the cross.

If we understand the cross of Christ, that will be our priority in prayer, the spread of the gospel, that others will come to hear the gospel and know Jesus and be saved. Well, secondly, Paul does though also pray for protection as he spreads the gospel.

He asks them to pray, verse 2, that we may be rescued from wicked and evil people. There are people who won't accept the gospel when they hear it and in fact will be violent in their opposition to the gospel and will persecute Christians.

For as Paul says, not all will have faith. And he asks for protection from such people. And while those who persecute Christians don't have faith, he goes on to say, yet faithful is the Lord.

[5 : 51] But the Lord is faithful. He will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. The Lord Jesus is faithful to strengthen the Thessalonian Christians as they suffer persecution and to guard or protect them from such attack, not meaning that they won't receive such attacks, but that their faith won't fall as they are persecuted and suffer, that they'll be able to stand firm to the end for Jesus.

Well, that's the end of my first point, praying for the spread of the gospel. I'd actually make the paragraph break there at the end of verse 3 myself and I think verses 4 to 15, most of the rest of the chapter is talking about keeping away from the idol, as we'll see.

This is where Paul gets to the heart of this chapter and he talks about some of the Thessalonians, a minority, but some of them who are being disobedient.

But most of them are being obedient. And he says about them, verse 4, we have confidence in the Lord concerning you that you are doing and will go on doing the things that we command.

So Paul's saying he's confident God is at work in most of them as Christians. And so he's confident that they'll obey his commands, which might sound a bit cultish perhaps.

[7 : 13] Paul wants them to obey his commands. Over and over in this letter he'll talk about his commands. But of course he's not just some sort of insecure, dictatorial, authoritarian leader.

He's the apostle to the Gentiles. He's aware as we'll see that when he's writing this letter, he's writing the very word of God. And that means to obey Paul is to obey God.

This is the word of God. And so over and over he gives commands in this chapter and he expects them to be obeyed. If you disobey Paul, you disobey God.

I realise these days that Paul can be unpalatable to many of us as Christians. He says things that go against what our society is now teaching.

People say Paul's a male chauvinist. They're happy to obey some things he says, but not to obey others. This passage would pull no punches and just say that's disobedience.

[8 : 11] What Paul commands is the word of God. But he is confident, he says here, that the Thessalonian Christians by and large are obeying and will keep obeying his commands.

And he prays in verse 5 for their strength to do that. He says, So he's praying that the Lord Jesus would direct their hearts, work in their inner being, so that they would love like God loves, so that they would stand firm like Christ stood firm, with his steadfastness.

So that as they suffer persecution, that they would keep trusting Jesus, keep obeying what the Bible says, with the love of God and with the steadfastness of Christ.

And now verse 6, here is his command. This is really a key verse for this chapter. He says, So there's his command.

And his command note there is given in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's not his opinion, it's not his wish, it's a command that he gives with the authority of the very word of God in the name of

the Lord Jesus.

[9 : 37] And his command is to keep away from disobedient believers. The passage is not actually about idleness as such, although we'll get to that.

It's about keeping away from Christians who are idle and who are not living according to the tradition they received from Paul. Now the word tradition there, by the way, does not mean what we mean often by tradition.

It's things that have been passed down and particularly teachings here. So it's those who don't live according to the teachings of Paul. And his teachings, of course, here are about idleness, but it could be about broader things too.

But the point is they're not obeying Paul's commands and they're living in idleness. And Paul is calling on the majority of Christians here who are obeying the word of God to keep away from fellow Christians who are living in idleness and not obeying the teaching of the Bible.

So we're in the area here of church discipline. Now we'll say more about that as we go through the letter, but let's look first before we do that at what the problem was.

[10 : 46] So the problem here, Paul says, is that some of them are living in idleness, which means laziness. It means, we'll see as we go on through the chapter, that they're not working to earn a living, to earn their keep.

They're what we might call doll bludgers. But he's not having a go at the unemployed as such. So if you are out of work at the moment, he's not necessarily saying that is wrong or anything like it, far from it.

So if people are out of work and are trying to find work and want to work, that's good. He's talking about people who are out of work purposely, who could work but refuse to work, who are living in idleness.

And in their society, it took the form of what is called a patron-client relationship, where a patron would support people so that they didn't have to work.

He would feed them, give them everything they needed and that would gain honour for the patron. Now I know we don't have that sort of system anymore, but I think we do have idleness still.

[11 : 55] I could think of a couple of examples myself. You might think of more. There are the idle rich. There are people who have so much money that they don't need to work and they can spend their time travelling, lounging around, doing whatever they like.

I was at a church in Sydney once where we had some very wealthy people at church and some of the men were able to work in a job that was so highly paid that their wives spent the day playing tennis, having coffee with their friends, doing whatever they wanted.

They were the idle rich. It also makes me think though of many children who stay on into their 20s or even 30s at home and spend a lot of their time on Facebook and Twitter and playing video games and occasionally they even study or do some work and their mum and dad is effectively their patron.

So we do have problems I think with some teenagers and really adults or kid-ults as my wife calls them being idle at home.

Paul sees two things as being very important here. One is that Christians work to earn their living and not idle. But secondly, he's saying that whatever the subject is, idleness or anything else, it's very important that Christians obey his commands, that we obey the teaching of the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul.

[13 : 24] And his command here is that we keep away from those who are idle and who don't follow his teachings. Well, before we come back to that again with church discipline, verses 7 to 9, Paul now talks about his example himself in this area of idleness.

And I have to admit, as I was thinking about this, it does worry me sometimes when people as Christians raise the whole topic of example. I think you get the situation where people, I guess to be blunt, are afraid of evangelism.

I understand that. It's confronting. But they're worried about sharing the gospel. So they say, well, I just want to be a witness at work through my example, as if the Holy Spirit will kind of ooze out of our paws and zap people into repentance and faith.

And I don't think that happens. But it is important that we have both evangelism and example. And Paul certainly talks about both and does so here. He speaks first about his example in verses 7 to 9 and then about his teaching as well in verse 10.

So first in verse 7 he says, for you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, to follow his example. The word ought there, by the way, is very strong.

[14:40] It's the word literally necessary or must. He's saying you yourselves know how it is necessary to imitate us, how you must imitate us. So it's actually a command again Paul is giving us here.

He's saying you must follow my example, you must imitate us. It's an important point when you think about it for ministry in general as well then, that we need to practice what we preach, that for those of us who are in any form of leadership, our lives need to back up what our teaching says. So whatever leadership you might be in, whether it's teaching CRE or SEBS or leading a Bible study group, teaching Sunday school, which means you wouldn't be here I guess, youth group, but any form of leadership here at church.

The people who sit under your teaching need to be able to see that your life reflects what you teach. And here Paul practised what he preached. And he gives the Thessalonians an example to follow and he says here, they must follow it.

And his example with idleness was this in verse 7. He says, We were not idle when we were with you, and we didn't eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labour we worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you.

[16:02] So pretty straightforward. Paul says, He and his mates weren't idle. They worked hard night and day. They didn't eat anyone's food without paying for it. And he says, verse 9, This was not because we don't have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate.

Of course, ministers have the right to be paid. Ministers should be paid very much so, but Paul says he wouldn't take pay from the Thessalonians because he wanted to give them this example to imitate, to follow in the area of idleness.

His example backed up his teaching. He was not idle when he was with them. And his teaching in verse 10, he reminds them of that. He says, For even when we were with you, we gave you this command, anyone unwilling to work should not eat.

So there's that word command again. Paul commanded them in his teaching that they need to work to earn their living. He's basically saying, No work, no food.

And Paul taught that and he lived it. Note again there, the word unwilling. It's not having a go at those who can't find work. He's having a go at those who refuse, who are unwilling to work.

[17:18] So I hope you can see the structure falling out of the passage, that verse 6, as I said, I think really is the key verse. Verses 7 to 10 are backing up his command in verse 6, where he's saying the Thessalonian Christians must keep away from their fellow Christians who are living in idleness, who are not following his example and teaching in that area.

But now in verses 11 and 12, he actually speaks to the minority, to the few who were actually being idle at the church. He says, verse 11, For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.

So someone has reported back to Paul that there are some people who won't work to earn their living and are living in idleness. And there's this great play on words in the Greek, the NIV brings it out better, where it says, they're not busy but being busybodies.

So they're not busy working to earn a living, but they're busy meddling in the affairs of other people. They've got too much time on their hands and in their idleness they're interfering with others instead of being busy at work.

And so Paul commands them in verse 12, Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and earn their own living.

[18:41] So pretty straightforward, Paul says, directly commands, exhorts that they repent, that they stop being idle and that they work and earn their living. Now amongst a group this size, I have no idea whether there is anybody here at the moment who fits into this category who's idle, but in case there is, and my guess is there may well be.

If you're not retired, if you're not a stay-at-home mum, if you should be working to earn a living, this is saying that if that's the case you'd need to repent and to get a job and work to earn your living. If you might say, well, I don't need the money, still, you could do voluntary work. So this is saying either way we need to be busy at work and to earn our keep.

Well now at the end of this section, verses 13 to 15, these are important verses where Paul comes back to the command that he started with in verse 6 about keeping away from those who are idle.

And first, addressing the rest of the church again now, not just the minority, he says, brothers and sisters do not be weary in doing what is right. So he's encouraging those who are obeying to keep working as they are, to keep not being idle, to keep obeying his commands.

[20 : 03] They're doing the right thing and he says, keep it up. But we come back to the heart of the matter in verses 14 and 15 and we're coming back to this topic of church discipline again where Paul reminds them as he commanded them in verse 6 to keep away from those Christians who don't follow his teachings and are being idle.

He tells them here in verse 14 to do two things. First of all, he says, take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter. So they're to mark, they're to take special note of those who do not obey Paul's teachings.

And it's an amazing thing just as an aside that he understands then in this letter he says that what he's saying is the word of God. He knows he's writing the word of God that those who disobey what he says are disobeying God.

Secondly, Paul says, verse 14, have nothing to do with them. I actually think that's probably a bit too strong the way the NRSV has put it. I don't think he means by that you could misunderstand it. I don't think he means have nothing whatsoever to do with those who don't obey Paul's teaching. So this is not excommunication. There are other passages in the New Testament that talk about excommunication but I think this is not one of them.

[21 : 25] So Paul says in verse 15, do not regard them as enemies but warn them as believers. So you still treat them as fellow Christians, you don't treat them as Jesus says somewhere else as pagans and tax collectors, that's excommunication but you treat them as fellow believers and you warn them he says in verse 15.

So you have to be able to have some contact with them to be able to warn or admonish them. So it might be better to translate those words in verse 14, have nothing to do with them as do not associate with them.

Meaning not have nothing to do with them at all but don't socialise with them. Shun them he's saying. Keep away from them as he says in verse 6. Don't associate with them and not with the purpose of destroying them but with the purpose verse 14 he says of shaming them that they might repent.

He wants them to repent so we're to warn and admonish such people as brothers and sisters in Christ to keep away from them not associate with them in the hope that they will be shamed into repentance.

I wonder if you're feeling a bit uncomfortable at this point. Church discipline I think is a topic that does make us by and large feel uncomfortable but I hope you can see that it's the main concern of this chapter in 2 Thessalonians 3.

[22 : 53] I'll come back to it in a moment and we'll talk about what I think it might mean for us today but before I do that let's just finish the last few verses briefly. Paul gives a blessing in verses 16 to 18 to finish not just this chapter but the whole letter and he prays three things for them.

First he wishes them peace. Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. So he's praying there that the Lord of peace Jesus himself would give them peace that remember they're in the midst of conflict and persecution and suffering he's praying that that conflict would end and that God would give them peace.

And secondly he prays that they would continue to have the presence of Jesus with them. At the end of verse 16 he prays that the Lord be with all of you. That again in the midst of their suffering and persecution that Jesus would be with them to strengthen them and to protect them.

And thirdly verse 18 he prays that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ would be with them all. So before we finish let's think about again what Paul has commanded us here in this chapter.

He hasn't so much commanded but he's asked us to pray for the spread of the gospel. It's very important that we pray for the spread of the gospel first and foremost. He has commanded the few who are idle to repent and to work to earn their living.

[24 : 28] But the key verses in this passage I think is verse 6 and verses 13 to 15 where he has commanded that we keep doing what is right. We keep working to earn our living but he's also commanded that we keep away from those Christians who say they're Christian.

I don't mean people who aren't yet Christian. People who say they're Christian who say they trust in Jesus he's commanded us to keep away from them if they won't work to earn their living or if they

disobey Paul's teachings.

We're to take special note of them and not to associate with them. Paul Barker preached on this passage in the evening congregation a few years ago.

I listened to his sermon and when he got to this point he was saying well most churches don't do church discipline these days. It's not even brought up as a topic. John Stott in his commentary says the same thing And so it's kind of ironic highly ironic we are not obeying Paul's command in these letters because we don't do church discipline.

So most churches in the West today don't obey Paul's teachings here and of course elsewhere. Our churches aren't shunning the disobedient we're shunning Paul's teachings about the disobedient. [25 : 49] And of course there are other teachings of Paul that we don't like these days and don't follow those either. So what are you supposed to do? Does it mean you shouldn't associate with most churches and Christians?

Well maybe the place to start with is ourselves and certainly in this area of church discipline I think we do need to change and we need to repent. Church discipline is very important and I know it makes us feel uncomfortable but I suspect it makes us feel uncomfortable because we're not used to it because again we're not obeying this and we're not doing it.

It makes me think for example of a new Christian where a new Christian will be in a small group perhaps or with a group of other Christians and they often find it very difficult to pray out loud but you don't then say to that new Christian well that's fine we don't ever want you to pray out loud. You encourage them well this is a good thing to do and you help them gradually take up the practice so that they're no longer uncomfortable with it and can pray out loud in a group of fellow Christians and I think this is similar we're uncomfortable with church discipline because we don't do it but we need to do it we need to obey what the Bible says and so perhaps we need to take small steps to gradually take up this practice of church discipline until we are comfortable with obeying the word of God in this area.

I've been at two churches where I've seen church discipline take place and it was difficult shocking even but I think very important. One of them I was at a large church where we had several dozen staff very large staff we had many young trainee ministers I guess you can have many because you don't sadly pay them very much so we had quite a large staff but one of the trainee ministers she was having difficulties maintaining godliness with her boyfriend at the time and after trying to repent and many rebukes the church leadership decided to stand her down from leadership.

[27 : 51] They didn't do that in front of the whole church they did it though in front of the group of leaders which was a sizeable group 40 to 50 leaders employed by the church and it did shame her and it was very difficult but it worked.

She repented as far as I know she's been a missionary for many years now and the effect also on the rest of us there was that the rest of us really sat up, took notice and started taking obedience to God very seriously indeed.

I think it was a good thing. Church discipline is very important and you see here in this chapter Paul is not addressing the pastors of the church but he's addressing all the church and so this is the responsibility of all of us of you and me to exercise this church discipline.

And what it means is that if you know a Christian at this church not someone who's not a Christian but somebody who says I'm a Christian and I trust in Jesus and if you know somebody who says that and they're refusing to follow some teaching of Paul or some other teaching of the Bible then I think this passage is very clear.

It says take special note of them and do not associate with them that they may be shamed and repent. and that is Paul's command to us today and we may not like it because it doesn't agree very much with our culture but it's the word of God and we'll be blessed as we obey the word of God together.

[29 : 26] So brothers and sisters do not tire of doing what is right. Take special note of those who do not obey Paul's teaching and do not associate with them that they may be ashamed and repent.

Let's pray that God will help us to obey him. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.