

Persevere in Goodness

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Preacher: Vijay Henderson

[0 : 00] When I first started reading chapter 3 in preparation for this talk, I thought that Malcolm Turnbull had written it. Because it looks like a Liberal Party manifesto. So I wonder if you thought the same thing.

Things like keep away from unemployed dull bludgers. There's ununionised labour in here. Perish the thought. Work hard. Those unwilling to work shall not eat. Pay your own way.

All that sort of thing. And it would be really easy to preach a sermon on the random moral of work hard and pay your own way. And at the end of it, instead of praying, as we do, I would have to say, spoken by V. Henderson, Liberal Party Doncaster, or something like that.

But in order to make sense of this really random chapter that seems to come out of nowhere, we have to be clear on the difference between a sickness and a symptom. A sickness and a symptom. And so to dive right in, some of you have got your Bibles open. That's going to really help me here. So have a look at verse 6 and verses 14. Verses 6 and 14 show what the underlying sickness is.

[1 : 07] Verse 6. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you receive from us.

Verse 14. Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. The main sickness in the Thessalonian church was not living according to Paul's teaching.

It was not obeying Paul's instruction. So it is disobedience to true teaching. And instead, believing lies instead.

And I've put that sickness at the top of your handouts. Gullible disobedience. Gullibly believing the lies about Jesus and his return. Instead of obeying Paul's instruction.

And last week we said that Paul's teaching that we should obey was the Jewish scriptures and his own testimony about Jesus. So the Jewish scriptures are the old.

[2 : 13] The testimony about Jesus is the new. The old and the new testaments. It is the Bible. The Bible is the truth we need to cling to whilst we live in a city full of lies.

And already the lie going around their city, as we said last week, was that Jesus had already returned. Some gullible Christians out there believed this lie.

Paul teaches the truth. He says that, no, Jesus is still on the way. And so the church must persevere until he returns. And by the time you get to the end of this letter, you realize that God has given the ancient Christians and us modern Christians everything we need to persevere until the day of the Lord.

And so my aim for this final sermon in the series is that we would live according to Paul's true teaching. And we would keep away from Christians who don't. I'll say that again.

My aim is that we would live according to Paul's true teaching and keep away from Christians who don't. And so there's a handout there with some points which tell you where I'm going.

[3 : 24] And please do keep your Bibles open. We're at point one. In a letter that encourages perseverance, I count seven prayers in three short chapters.

I think Paul is saying that without the Lord's help, perseverance is impossible. Maybe you've felt that as we've worked our way through this series, maybe you felt that standing up for Jesus in your Monday to Friday feels impossible.

Maybe you felt that holding fast to the Bible's teaching, just like Margaret Court, is impossible. After all, the world out there thinks Christians are dinosaur bigots, after all.

Paul's reaction to the seemingly impossible task of persevering is prayerful dependence on the Lord. That's where he starts. And our passage, verses one to five, is another call to prayer.

So verse one, Paul says his job is to spread the name of the Lord. That's his work. And verse two, his workplace environment is wicked and evil.

[4 : 34] Unfaithful is the language. That is an impossible job unless he's dependent on the Lord. So verse one, pray that the Lord will spread his word.

It's Paul's work. Verse two, pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people. That is for safety. And when it comes to the Thessalonians, I'm going to read verses three to five.

Listen out for the Lord at work again. Verses three to five. But the Lord is faithful and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command.

May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance. Does wicked and evil and unfaithful describe your nine to five?

Is your regular weeks, your jobs, your neighborhoods, are they like that? Well, in this city, Melbourne has been awarded the most livable city for as long as I can remember.

[5 : 45] I can't remember a year we haven't won the most livable city. I don't know what we're doing, but let's keep doing it. But actually. In a city full of disobedience to the Bible's teaching, in a city full of lies about Jesus, contrary to public to popular opinion, as far as God is concerned, this is a wicked city.

And so we need to be strengthened and protected from the evil one whose lies would stop us persevering. So the Lord is faithful. It says in verse three, let that motivate us to come to him.

The Lord can direct our hearts into a Christlike perseverance. It's verse five. Let that motivate us to ask him for help when we're outside this safe HTT bubble.

This past Wednesday night, we had our kingdom growth night. That's where we all come together to pray for our ministry and for one another. And this time there were 42 people there.

It's not bad. Normally there's 70. That seems like a lot of people. But actually, in a church as large as ours, I wonder if it's a shame that there were only that many people here to pray.

[7 : 04] And so permission to challenge us gently. The next kingdom growth night is, I've put it incorrectly on your handout, it's actually Wednesday the 6th of September.

Wednesday the 6th of September. Could we please put that in our diaries? And we're all busy. There's no doubt about it. And I know that lots of us can't make it for personal circumstances.

That's okay. But I wonder if for the vast majority of us, we need this challenge. God works as his people pray. Wednesday, 6th of September, 7.30pm.

Just 45 minutes. We're as a church family. We come together to show dependence on the Lord. Because I think if this letter shows only one thing, it is the impossibility of persevering in a city like this.

And so we must be asking the Lord's help. The Lord is faithful, it says. He can direct our hearts. He is sovereign and powerful. He knows what it's like to persevere himself.

[8 : 09] We only need to ask for his help. God works as his people pray. The other way that Jesus helps us to persevere is by following the right example.

And this is our next point. Let me read from verse 7. 7. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. Paul says his example shows that he is living as if Jesus is still on the way.

That he is living according to the truth. Not like those gullible Christians who are living according to a lie that Jesus has already returned. So halfway through verse 7.

We were not idle when we were with you. Nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling, so that we would not be a burden to any of you.

We did this not because we don't have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. It seems in verse 8 that Paul didn't want to burden the church by asking for room and board.

[9 : 21] Clearly he believes that persevering is enough of a burden for the church to bear. But these gullible, disobedient Christians, they think the church has no bigger burden than to provide them with three square meals a day.

Because they believe Jesus has already come and gone. Now just an important caveat in here. The church is the, or should be, the authentic community in the world.

So it's a place where we share with one another so that no one is in need. That is the language of Acts. And so relying on the church and the church family for support is a perfectly biblical idea.

And this passage is not speaking about those legitimate circumstances. But rather Paul is contrasting himself who's going above and beyond, desperate that the church is not overburdened, with those who abuse the kindness of the church.

Who would rather support themselves through the church than go out and earn a living. And what Paul is doing is modeling an example to all Christians that we all need to play a part in shouldering the burden of perseverance on this church.

[10:40] Now shouldering the burden of the church will look different in a lot of circumstances. So here are a few circumstances. So it could be increasing financial giving. Definitely starting to give financially.

You see, when we do that, that pays for ministers like Mark Chu and Andrew Price. It pays for buildings like this. It enables the proclamation of the truth that we can stand firm in.

There is so much serving that goes on here, especially behind the scenes when no one else knows. It's so valuable. That does the necessary other jobs so that Andrew Price and Mark Chu can get on with the main job of proclamation of the truth.

Shouldering the responsibility of perseverance could be leading a small group. If you've got the gifting, it could be attending a small group. It could mean spending time over a cup of tea, asking someone how their Christian life is going, rather than talk about the footy and how cold it is. It could mean going into full-time ministry, if that is your gifting. And we could go on and on and on. There are so many ways we could shoulder the responsibility together to help this church persevere.

[11:56] And so I put a question at the bottom of your handout for your quiet times this week. What could you do to help the HTD family shoulder its perseverance burden? I'd love you to discuss that with people close to you.

That is the model Paul lays down for us, shouldering the burden together. And now that we've had Paul's good example, let's turn to look at those who weren't helping.

This is our last point. So look at verse 11. We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy, but busy bodies.

And remember we said at the start that idleness was the symptom. The deepest sickness was gullible disobedience. And I think this is how it works. So I'm going to illustrate it.

If I gullibly believed the lie that Jesus had already returned, what is the point of anything anymore? If I were not rescued and swept up with him in heaven, but suffering down here on earth, what is the point?

[12:59] And I certainly wouldn't turn up for my 6am woolly shift tomorrow morning. That is true, by the way. The sun is not even up at 6am.

It's not. It's inhuman. But anyway. And I could say to you, well, I'm part of the HTD family. And you should, you know, pay for my meals. You're all Christians after all.

Come on, step up. Pay for me. If Jesus has already returned, what is the point of doing anything anymore? And I think that is where the idleness comes in.

Now, idleness is only one outward sign that I believed lies about Jesus' return. It was their particular issue there.

Deuteronomy 30, which was our first reading, that showed us that believing lies and not holding fast to true teaching, that was a sickness that has always plagued God's people, even since the time of ancient Israel.

[13:59] And please note that idleness is not speaking about unemployed people who are looking for work. Nor is it talking about stay-at-home parents who look after children, nor look after grandchildren.

Nor is it talking about people who take care of sick relatives. All of these things are godly, godly work. Nor is idleness speaking about retired persons who, due to personal circumstance of perhaps age or perhaps health, aren't as able as they used to be.

The language of verse 10 is that someone is unwilling to work. There's nothing wrong with them. But where Paul cares about shouldering the responsibility for the church, these people want to abuse that kindness.

Idleness. And idleness is the Thessalonian symptom. But there could be other symptoms for us as well. So, it could be idleness as well, but it might very easily be the selfishness or the sexual immorality of the Corinthians.

It might be the arrogance and infighting of the Philippians. It might be the unwholesome talk or the lack of love of the Ephesians. Or it might be the materialism and individualism of the Melburnians. [15:20] All of these are symptoms of a deeper sickness that we have forgotten the Bible's teaching and are believing the lies that are available in this city for us.

And here is the rub. Because the problem with a sickness like this is that it is a contagious disease. It is contagious to other Christians.

Now, let me illustrate. There are... I'm a parent of a young child. And I can tell you from personal experience, there are few crimes greater in Australia than taking a sneezing, coughing toddler to kindergarten.

Parents who don't believe in the death penalty suddenly do. Because they're furious that you will get their kids infected. Which is fair enough. And I think that's Paul's attitude here.

He is furious or he's really terrified that his own kids, his own Christians, will be infected as well. Keep away is his language in verse 6.

[16:21] Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instructions, verse 14. They have the plague. Don't associate with them, he says.

They have an infectious disease. And I think that explains the seriousness of his tone in verse 6. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you.

It's very strong. Their gullible disobedience is an infectious disease for the rest of the church. And the problem is because we remember the Thessalonians.

And they were a tiny church. They were beset by disaster on all sides. There was violence outside from those loyal to Caesar. There were lies inside. If they are going to make it until that final day when Jesus returns, everyone needs to be playing their part.

We all need to be shouldering this perseverance responsibility. Even God was working, as we saw in our first point. But these commands of keep away, not associate with, I think they're very tricky for us to apply.

[17:34] And they're tricky because HTD is a little bit different to the church in Thessalonica. So they met in tiny house churches. They were in each other's lives because the violence outside meant they had to be caring for one another's physical safety all the time.

Whereas we live most of our Christian lives away from one another. It's really hard in this context to know who is struggling with a personal spiritual sickness like this.

And so I think it's easier for us to apply it not to HTD individuals, but HTD activities. So that's what we're going to do now. All church activities start with the best of intentions.

So there are ones for teaching, the Sunday services, midweek Bible studies. There are ones just for fellowship. So think of our chicken and chips lunch once a month.

All of these play a role in helping us to persevere. They give us the truth. They encourage us in fellowship. They're all vital in our church. And so it is worth testing whether all these well-intentioned activities are still helping us to persevere or whether they are now hindering us.

[18:50] Let me illustrate with a few examples. For the past 10 years, I've been living in London. And in London, there are these Christian holidays you can go on. And they're really well-intentioned.

So go on holidays, go skiing holidays, Holy Land tours around Europe with other like-minded Christians. A really fantastic idea. And my buddies and I, in 2012, we went on a ski holiday to France.

And it was brilliant, I thought. And when we got there, though, we found out that drinking was the main order of the day, not skiing. And so in that instance, my buddies and I, we had to distance ourselves from the mob.

We had to keep away, says Paul. Do not associate with them. Thanks, but no thanks, should be the attitude.

There were these Christian singles nights that used to go on. Again, really good intention. The idea being it is better for Christians not to find a partner in a sleazy bar amongst people who could lead them away from the Lord.

[19:55] But actually, these Christian singles nights ended up being the sleazy affairs that they were trying to avoid. And Christians would lead other Christians away from the Lord.

Keep away, says Paul. Don't associate with them. Thanks, but no thanks. I'm sure over the years, you've all been part of a small group somewhere or know of a small group.

That is two minutes of Bible study and 58 minutes of gossip about someone. Maybe it's talk about house prices and share portfolios instead. How will this group help people to persevere? Keep away, says Paul. Don't associate with them. Thanks, but no thanks. And we've talked about activities, but it might actually be that you know of certain Christians who are no longer obeying the Bible's teaching, but believing the lies of the world instead.

It could mean that your regular meetups, regular coffees, you might have to say thanks, but no thanks. Keep away, says Paul. Do not associate with them.

[21 : 05] Of course, that would mean you'd have to explain why, not just not turn up one day. A conversation would be needed. But the tests should be for every Christian individual, every Christian activity.

And I've put it at the bottom of your handout. Is this activity or Christian friendship still helping others to persevere until Jesus returns? Or is it hindering them?

There are quite a few groups that I know of here at HCD that are really top notch. So there's a Men's Connect group, which we plug a lot from this congregation.

That was started by a few fellows who decided to take the lead in godliness. That is incredible.

There is the Young Mums Bible Study on Friday morning. The Young Adults Bible Study on Wednesday nights.

Brilliant, all of them. But this passage says it would not be too religiously boring, too religiously intense to ask, are these activities still helping others to persevere?

[22 : 10] Or are they hindering them? And you see, Paul's strategy of keeping away and not associating with, it is not necessarily so people will leave HTD or these activities will end, but rather that they be reformed, that they be made healthy again.

Verse 12. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. Notice Paul doesn't banish them from the church. He would rather they settle down and be reformed.

Verse 14. Do not associate with them in order that they may feel ashamed. Paul wants to shame these people in a loving way. He wants to shame them into reform, that they be made healthy again.

He wants spiritually sick people and spiritually sick activities to once again help people to persevere as they once did. Remember that these people and activities are Christian.

That's important. Verse 15. Do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer. But you see, if these believers refuse to settle down, if they refuse to fall back into line under the authority of the apostle, then they're showing by their outward disorder that they've got that inward sickness of disobeying true teaching.

[23 : 41] Keep away, says Paul. Don't associate with them. Thanks, but no thanks. And so that is Two Thessalonians, a tiny book with a really big message about perseverance.

And if I can put another application on you, I hope that after we've studied this book together, you will go away and read it for yourself. It's only three chapters. Read it with a loved one as part of your quiet times.

And the reason why is this. Once you've had some teaching on a book and have a fair idea of what it's saying, when you read it for yourself afterwards, you will find that the words become three-dimensional, that the text lifts up off the page.

You will be able to see things that we haven't had a time to look at, and you will greater understand things we have looked at. And I hope that when you do, you will realize that this tiny book is a full medicine cabinet for everything you need to persevere until Jesus returns.

This book is a gem to keep under your belts while we live in a city like this. When you're feeling the struggle of perseverance, come back to Two Thessalonians, that it would be medicine for you.

[24 : 56] So chapter one, keep growing as a Christian, even in the face of persecution, because Jesus' return will liberate you and judge your enemies.

Keep persevering. Chapter two, don't believe the lies that Jesus is never coming back. Rather, stand firm and hold fast to the truth.

Keep persevering. And chapter three today, obey Paul and the Bible's teaching. Keep away from Christians who don't. They have an infectious disease.

Keep persevering. So let me finish by borrowing Paul's prayers. Now may the Lord of peace himself give us peace at all times and in every way as we try to persevere in a city like this.

We praise you, Lord Jesus, that you will return to liberate us and judge those who are your enemies. We praise you that you are faithful and you will strengthen us and protect us from the evil one's lies.

[26 : 00] Help us to keep doing the things the Bible commands of us, even in this city. And we pray, Lord Jesus, that you would direct our hearts into God's love and to a Christ-like perseverance.

We ask it in your name. Amen. Amen.