

Untiring in Doing Right

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[0 : 0 0] We'll keep open the Bible reading page at page 962. This is the third and final of our series on two Thessalonians and it was preceded by a series on one Thessalonians in the mornings and let's pray now for God to speak to us.

Speak Lord into our hearts your powerful word that it may bear much fruit and for your glory on the day when Jesus is revealed. Amen.

Well being a student is a good life, an easy life. I was a student for many years. I think I did 10 years of being a student as a tertiary student as well as the usual secondary and primary stuff and it's a pretty good life because you laze around for pretty much all year.

Some of it's official laze, that is three months over Christmas and then sort of from March to early November that's sort of an unofficial laze around and then all of a sudden you start studying for two weeks and you have what people call exams and then you officially laze then for three months or so till it all resumes.

When I teach at Bible College, I sometimes say at the beginning of the course that if I had my way, which I don't and they're lucky, but if I had my way, then I would give them exams during the course at dates unknown to them until it happens.

[1 : 3 2] That is, they would arrive thinking that they were going to have a lecture and in fact they would have an exam. I actually think that would be a better way to do the course myself.

Nobody else I've ever met agrees with me on that. The question is, would they study harder? That is, in effect, they've got to be prepared that they know the whole of the course each week.

Well, I doubt it, to be honest. But there's an element of me that thinks maybe we should try it. The thing is, of course, we tend to laziness, most of us. And so when deadlines are distant and known or unknown, really, they don't often provoke us into action.

And so we laze. Well, that's the student life. The deadline that you and I face is the return of Jesus Christ. He's coming on a day unknown.

That is, it's not the second week of November at 9am in the morning and pens down three hours later. It's at a date unknown. But that's the deadline. And it's a deadline that's drawing near for each one of us.

[2 : 3 8] How near, we're not sure. But we are told in the New Testament 2,000 years ago that the Lord is coming soon. And during this time of the approaching deadline, we're facing opposition as Christian believers.

We face opposition in all sorts of ways and that varies from country to country, society to society. We are certainly facing the spirit of lawlessness lawlessness before that man of lawlessness comes at the very end, just about at the very end, before Jesus returns, as we saw last week.

We face a period of deception, as again we saw last week in the time leading up to the final deadline. And we saw last week that we are urged in this time to stand firm and hold fast to our faith as we await the return of Jesus and as we confront the opposition to him and to us.

What else should mark this time of the approaching deadline? That is, what else in us and our behavior should be priorities in this time of Jesus coming and coming soon and in the midst of that time facing opposition, persecution, deception, growing and increasing lawlessness and so on.

What are the priorities for us during these last days? This chapter is arising out of that context that we saw last week. The impending coming of Jesus, standing firm, being ready for that, but at the same time resisting the deception and lawlessness that abounds.

[4 : 21] And three priorities arise out of this passage tonight. And the first one is prayer. Finally, brothers and sisters, prayer is how the chapter begins. But prayer is a constant theme through one and two Thessalonians.

It's not that Paul now devotes a couple of verses to the theory of prayer or the urgency of prayer in the light of Jesus' return or the importance of prayer in the light of the opposition. Rather, both these letters, which have a constant theme of Jesus coming again and standing firm for that day, are peppered with prayer.

prayer. And the prayers, 17 of them perhaps, in the eight chapters of these two letters, are God-directed prayers and God-honouring prayers.

That's the motivation and the driving force behind the prayers that we see examples of scattered through these two letters. They are not prayers for human ease or comfort or relief or prosperity or health or joy.

They are prayers for strength, for endurance, for persevering. That what God promises will be fulfilled on the final day when Jesus is revealed in glory.

[5 : 36] So we see that, for example, in verse 5 of this chapter, chapter 3. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. That is, it's a prayer for the Thessalonians, but it's not for their comfort and ease.

It's looking forward to the final day of glorification when Jesus returns and he is glorified in them and they in him, as we saw two weeks ago. Now, at the beginning of this chapter, Paul actually asks for prayer for himself.

Pray for us is how verse 1 goes on to say. But again, Paul is not praying especially for his own comfort and ease, although I'll make a comment about verse 2 a little bit later where he says that we may be rescued.

Rather, Paul's driving force in praying is for the spread of the gospel. Pray for us so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere.

Don't pray for us so that we'll be relieved of enemies. Don't pray for us so that the persecutors will all be converted and we'll have a very nice time in Corinth. Thank you very much. Rather, pray that the gospel spreads.

[6 : 42] And that's the sort of prayer that we find throughout 1 and 2 Thessalonians indeed through the New Testament. Prayers that are God-honoring, God-glorifying, God-directed, God-motivated. That is that the glory of God through the spread of the gospel will be evident.

And then at the end of this chapter it concludes with prayer. Verse 16, May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you. And then verse 18, In the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.

Again, God-centered, God-focused prayers, not for ease from attack or comfort for the Thessalonians, but for rather in the midst of the opposition and persecution that they face for peace, God's presence and God's grace.

It's by example in these letters, though by teaching in other places, that the priority of prayer is clear for believers in the last days, awaiting the Lord's return and facing opposition and persecution.

Prayer is to be a key priority in the Christian life, not least because Jesus is coming soon and not least again because we live as Christians under attack, deception, lawlessness, threats, persecution, whatever.

[8 : 00] So Paul says in verse 3, But the Lord is faithful, he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. That's the context in which prayer is a priority for the Thessalonians and indeed for Christians in general.

It begs the question then, to what extent are our prayers like Paul's prayers? To what extent is the urgency of our praying like Paul's urgency? To what extent are the content of our prayers like the content of Paul's prayers here and elsewhere in the New Testament?

To what extent do we pray regularly, persistently and urgently for perseverance in the Christian faith? To what extent are we praying that on the final day we will be holy and blameless in the sight of the Lord Jesus Christ, the glorified judge?

To what extent are we praying that even as we face opposition and difficulty, we are praying primarily for the spread of the gospel and the glory of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, even when we're under duress?

The confidence Paul has to pray comes out of the faithfulness of God. We see that in verses three and four. Paul prays, rather the end of verse two and into verse three, he prays that he'll be rescued from wicked and evil people for not all have faith but the Lord is faithful.

[9 : 34] He will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. You see, the confidence Paul has to pray is not a confidence in human beings.

Not all have faith. In particular, of course, the enemies, the persecutors, the oppressors, they don't have faith. But he also knows that people can drift away. But God is faithful and that's what drives Paul to prayer.

Indeed, very often, I think, our lack of prayer may stem indeed from a lack of confidence in God. Confidence in God drives us to pray.

We may well think it should be the opposite. If we don't have confidence in God, then we're going to fall down on our knees and beseech him. But not at all, actually. That doesn't happen. It's confidence in God that drives us to pray.

And our lack of confidence in God may be misplaced confidence in ourselves will actually corrode any prayers that we might want to pray.

[10 : 36] So it's confidence in God that drives Paul to pray, verse 5, may the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. It's because he knows that God is faithful to protect and guard against the evil one to the final day that he prays with confidence the prayer of verse 5 with confidence that God will keep that prayer and fulfil it because Paul is confident that God keeps his promises so Paul keeps praying the promises of God for himself and the Thessalonians.

And it's not a prayer for ease. Though he prays for rescue from wicked and evil people in verse 2, fundamentally he's praying for the spread of the gospel and that's why he prays for rescue.

The first priority is prayer and that leads into this second priority which is now in a sense taught here a bit more clearly is evangelism. The driving force is the spread of the gospel.

That's what Paul's praying for here and that of course is his urgent passion in his life and in his mission and ministry. And in the context of the day of the Lord coming and coming soon and in the context of the opposition, the persecution, the oppression that Christian believers face on earth and the rising lawlessness that is actually the power of the evil one behind it culminating in the man of lawlessness just before the return of Jesus.

The spread of the gospel must be a priority. Literally verse 1 says so that the word of the Lord may run. It's as though the word of the Lord is not sort of an inanimate object.

[12 : 17] Here's a little Bible here but it's as though the Bible or the word of God is itself running like in a race. Now you look down at the MCG at the Commonwealth Games and you see all these human, superhuman type athletes running around and there's the word of God running around.

Well that's the sort of image that Paul's actually using. Not just that the word of God may spread rapidly but that it may run because the word of God is powerful.

It's not just ink on page. And Paul is praying that it will yes spread rapidly as this translation says but that it itself will take off and run and run through the world run through the known and the unknown world to the far ends of the earth and with fruit.

It's not just a run for show because he goes on to say that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere. And if it's going to be glorified that is the word of God being glorified that will only ever happen if people receive it with faith and repentance.

Not because they say what a wonderful old book this is. That's not glorifying it at all. The only way the word of the Lord is glorified is when God is glorified by humility and repentance and faith.

[13 : 32] So Paul is praying that the gospel spreads but that as it spreads human beings everywhere where it spreads fall to their knees in repentance and faith at the word of God or at the gospel of God.

In a sense those ideas are more or less synonymous I think in Paul's thinking here. That it's a word of God suggests that God has spoken he's a revealing God that is we can know sufficient about God to fall to our knees in repentance and faith and trust him and trust his promises that his word conveys.

It is God who determines the word and the content of the gospel that Paul and others are ministers of. Now Paul is not saying here that the priority of evangelism means that we've all got to be like him.

That we've got to pack our bags when we go home tonight and catch the first plane, train, bus or camel to get out of Melbourne to go to the far ends of the earth with the gospel and have a black floppy Bible on a street corner or whatever.

Not at all. The priority of evangelism does not necessarily mean all of us are evangelists but all of us are to pray for the spread of the gospel.

[14 : 44] All of us are to support the work of the gospel in the ways in which we are equipped and gifted so to do. For Paul that meant preaching and travelling. For others it may be staying where we are.

For others it may be teaching CRE in schools. For others it will be being a living witness in our places of work. For others it will be giving significantly generously for the sake of missionaries evangelists preachers and pastors in all sorts of places local and international.

And for all of us it will include praying for the work of the gospel. Now in a sense I've just summarised partly what we did as a sermon series earlier in the year in the morning service under the title of promoting the gospel.

All of us have responsibility to promote the gospel. It is a fundamental priority in these end times as Jesus coming draws nearer and as the opposition grows greater.

How we do that will depend on our gifts our abilities the things that God has prompted us to. But all of us have responsibility to promote the gospel and for all of us that includes prayer.

[15 : 53] You see the key defence against the man of lawlessness is the gospel. The key defence against the deception of the evil one in these last days is the gospel.

Both ourselves believing it and promoting it to others who are not yet believers. In saying this I think that Christian prayers are probably far too diminished in scope.

Maybe that's been a trend over the last decades, I'm not sure. But let me give you some examples to show what I mean by our prayers being perhaps too diminished in scope.

We pray for Iraq. Fundamentally I guess we pray for peace. We prayed a few years ago probably for the end of the Saddam Hussein regime and all its barbarity.

We pray for peace. It's not a bad thing to pray. I think it's too diminished in scope. Do we pray that in that situation the gospel will flourish and spread?

[17 : 08] Because let me tell you it's not. The end of Saddam's regime has been a terrible disaster for the churches and Christians in Iraq and in Syria and in other neighbouring countries.

We want to make poverty history and that's a good thing. We know though that the Bible teaches us there will always be poor on earth. And yes while we may pray and work for the end of poverty are we at the same time praying for the spread of gospel wealth that people find the greatest treasure in heaven?

We might pray for those who are persecuted as indeed most in the year and mostly in September we have a focus at Holy Trinity on praying for such folk and that is good.

I suspect that very often our prayers are along the lines of may the persecution be converted and go away. That's not actually Paul's prayer. Paul's prayer is for perseverance for believers even at the cost of their lives at times but prayer that the gospel spreads not for the ease of those being persecuted and oppressed by opponents.

We pray for rain, a good thing to pray for which we've already done tonight, something we should keep on doing. And yet the Bible keeps warning us that the absence of rain is very often a sign from God, a warning to bring people to repentance and faith.

[18 : 49] So as well as praying for rain are we praying that in the drought of this country that it will bring men and women and children to their knees in repentance and faith under the almighty God that they'll respond with faith to the gospel, that the gospel will therefore flourish and bear fruit.

That's what I mean by diminished scope of prayers. We might pray for an ease to poverty or a return to good health or a job when we're unemployed or for rain in a drought or peace in a war-torn country.

Good things to pray for, pray for them still. But the bigger, deeper and in a sense more God-centered or God-glorifying context of praying is that these situations bring glory to God and the spread of God's gospel for the sake of eternity.

The Pope met the Mufti of Istanbul this week. This was quite a precarious and controversial visit to Turkey because of words that the Pope said to two or three months ago which has provoked quite a deal of opposition to the Pope in Turkey and rightly so, let me say.

I think his words were rather infelicitous at best. But the Pope and the Mufti, the leading Islamic leader of Turkey, prayed in the Blue Mosque, a very famous mosque in the centre of Istanbul, a place that I've been in before.

[20 : 14] The Mufti said that they together ought to be people who could pray together for peace. In one sense, fair enough. Now we don't actually know what the Pope prayed, although we gather that that's what the Mufti prayed when they went into the mosque together.

But it strikes me that in that sort of context, one in which our country is in the grip of as well, that the deception of pluralism and relativism diminishes the gospel and diminishes our prayers and our scope of praying.

It's good to pray for peace. But more importantly, and more God honouring, and more in line with the context of Jesus' return coming closer, and more in the context of facing opposition to the gospel and the rise of deception and lawlessness is praying for the gospel to spread, praying for the gospel to bear fruit, praying for Muslims amongst others to be converted to Jesus Christ.

For true peace, of course, only ever is the fruit of the gospel of Christ. Priority of prayer and a priority of evangelism, and thirdly, the priority of work.

This may be particular to the Thessalonians, who it seems at least had some of their number who were rather intent on being idle or loafing. Back in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, Paul warned in verse 11, the Thessalonians to mind your own affairs and to work with your hands as we directed you, implying that some were not minding their own affairs but were being busybodies, and some were not working with their own hands but being lazy.

[21 : 58] And also in the next chapter of 1 Thessalonians, chapter 5, verse 14, he urged them, beloved, to admonish the idlers. It seems those warnings were unheeded.

It's not certain what lies behind their intent idleness. Some speculates that it's the thinking that Jesus' return is so soon, why bother working?

I mean, after all, if we knew that Jesus is coming back next Thursday afternoon at 3.37pm Eastern Standard Time or summertime, we may not go to work tomorrow. I'd consider that.

And it may be that the idleness is because of that over-expectation of the Lord's return. It may not be. It may just simply be human laziness, which of course is a sin most of us are prone to at one time or another.

Paul's teaching here teaches us that Christians have an obligation to be willing to work. Note willing, because of course not in every situation can every person get a job for one reason or another, economic or physical.

[23 : 03] Willingness is the important thing. Working is an important part of being in God's world. It was actually something given to Adam before the fall, that he was to till the land and look after it.

Work is there. It's not a cause of God's punishment. It's actually part of being human in the creation of God. Working is about not providing a burden to other people, that they are the ones who provide for us.

Working is also for the good of society, for the benefit of others, and working is to create, in a sense, a possibility of giving and generosity for the benefit of others who are worse off than ourselves.

Laziness is frequently condemned in the scriptures, not least in the book of Proverbs. In these verses, 6 to 15, the centre point of this chapter, Paul addresses the issue of the priority of work.

He does it, in a sense, in two parts. The necessity to be willing to work as a Christian obligation, and then the issue of, well, what do you do with those who refuse to be willing to work?

[24 : 08] Verse 6, he addresses the Thessalonians in general, and he urges them to keep away from believers who are living in idleness, and not according to the tradition that they receive from us.

That is the teaching that Paul gave them, which would, it seems, be clear, included the necessity to work. He's talking here about Christians who are idlers, not people in general, and he's saying to the Thessalonians who are not idlers, keep away from them.

Maybe because he's aware that their laziness may be actually a bit of an enticement to you to be lazy too. And these are people who persist in living in idleness.

It's not just that they are for a day or two, you know, they have a lazy day, you know, I don't like Mondays or Sundays, but these are people who persist in living in idleness, the way the words are written in verse 6.

Paul then reminds them of his own example in verses 7 to 9. You yourselves know how you ought to imitate us. We were not idle when we were with you and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it.

[25 : 10] We gather that he stayed with his friends at the house of Jason. It seems that Paul had earned money and earned money there to pay for his board so that he didn't put his hosts under any sort of impoverishment.

But with toil and labor, that is hard work and sweat, we worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you. Paul took seriously his ministry of preaching the gospel, but at the same time when he came to a new place to preach the gospel, he made sure that he wasn't being a financial burden to them.

And so his own working as a tent maker, we gather, would fund himself so that he could pay for his keep. This was not because we do not have that right.

Yes, a preacher of the gospel has the right to be paid is what he's saying, he makes that clear in his letters to the Corinthians, for example, but in order to give you an example to imitate. So Paul reminds them of that example of work.

He himself is not commanding them to do something he was not himself prepared to do. And then in verse 10, he says, for even when we were with you, we gave you this command, anyone unwilling to work should not eat.

[26 : 19] It may be the way he quotes it there, that it's a well-known proverb or maxim, it's not biblical, but it's not unbiblical in its direction. Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.

That is, there are times when for economic reasons people are unemployed, it may be because of health or other physical reasons that some people can't work. Willingness to work is what's important.

And of course, in a society like this one here, without social security, if you didn't work, well, you don't get the doll. The government doesn't bail you out. It's the friends and families and neighbours who do that.

So Paul then summarises in verse 11, for we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies not doing any work. There's a little play on words there, you're busy bodies, but your actual bodies are not busy.

That is, you're interfering in other people's lives and you're lazing and loafing around. Well, Paul has argued in those verses that Christians ought to be willing to work and fundamentally and basically would be working.

[27 : 26] Now the issue is, well, what do you do with those who don't, those who refuse these commands? Well, verse 12, he directs himself to them. Now such persons, the idlers, we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

That's strong language. Paul is bringing together everything he can by way of emphasising this command and exhortation in the Lord Jesus Christ to work.

That is, they can't dismiss this and say, this is just Paul's opinion. No, he's getting divine authority from Jesus in this as well. Verse 13, for those who do work, they are not to be weary in doing what is right.

That is, sometimes when people are lazy, you think, well, why should I bother? I remember this when I shared living a house, which was an awful experience, but a fundamental, a necessary one when I was a student for economic reasons.

And to be honest, some of the people in the house were extremely lazy. And so the temptation for me was, well, why should I bother cleaning the house? Why should I do the dishes? They never do it. And so you actually end up being as lazy as they are.

[28 : 41] Paul is saying, don't fall into that trap. Never tire in doing what is right, even if others don't. How do you relate to them? Verse 6 says, keep away from them.

Verse 14 says, take note of those who do not obey and have nothing to do with them. Shun them. Now he may be meaning there, don't let them into Christian fellowship, although he doesn't quite go that far.

He doesn't say excommunicate them. But he's saying, ostracize them. That is, shame them into working. See how verse 14 goes on?

So that they may be ashamed. Don't regard them as enemies. Warn them as believers. That is, by being idle, they've not necessarily given up the faith and gone outside into pagan land.

They're still believers, but they've got their ethics wrong. Shun them so that they're ashamed, so that out of their shame they will repent and that they will then turn back to work and to earn a living for themselves.

[29 : 41] That's an act of love, actually, as well as an act of discipline. Well, the imminent coming of the Lord Jesus is no reason for us to be idle, if indeed that was the reason why these folk were.

Indeed, it's all the more reason for us to work, to labor, to labor hard as we anticipate Jesus' deadline of coming again as it looms on the horizon.

The added incentive to work, of course, is that we're under attack from persecutors and opponents and deception, and we're to give no room to the devil. What Paul is commanding the working Thessalonian believers is church discipline here.

Church discipline is almost totally ignored. It was never taught to me in my Bible college training to be a minister. The Anglican Diocese of Melbourne has hardly ever breathed a whisper of church discipline, in my experience, and so there are churches where they don't believe anything other than the first four words of the creed.

But there's no hint of church discipline, for example, for such unbelief or immorality in other places. Why is it that church discipline these days is a no-go area?

[30 : 55] Partly I think that's because of our high degree of individualism. That is, we decide what we do or don't do, and even within Christian fellowship, I'm still my boss.

That's part of the age in which we live. Partly I think it's due to the privatisation of religion, which comes, I guess, out of 19th century Britain. Religion is a private matter, not a public one, and so how I live as a believer is up to me and not up to you to tell me what to do.

I hear that from time to time when people don't like sermons. Partly I think it's due to a post-modern thinking and ethical relativism. That is, the ethics of what I do and don't do is up to me to interpret in this post-modern age.

There's all sorts of possibilities and a relativism about what is right ethically. Partly I think that church discipline is absent because churches are so often very small and people are so desperate to have an organist or a choir or somebody who's going to be the treasurer or something like that.

That is, their desperation to have a few bums on pews means that we don't want to have any church discipline. We need every person we can get. Partly I think it's due to a lack of love.

[32 : 11] We don't love one another enough to discipline each other to be holy and blameless on the day of the Lord's return. Partly I think it's due to a belittling of biblical authority.

We don't mind the stories of the Bible but let's keep them at arm's distance and if I don't want to work, well no one else is going to tell me to. Partly I think all those reasons come in.

The main reason is sin and pride. That's why church discipline falls by the wayside because so often we're sinners. The church discipline here that Paul commands is church discipline with love as indeed all church discipline is meant to be.

It's not a condemnation of getting rid of people but it's a shunning them so that ultimately they come back in repentance and they come back as hard-working believers.

Church discipline's aim is for mutual holiness, mutual purity and blamelessness on the day of Christ. Church discipline's aim is for perseverance in godliness and faith.

[33 : 24] Church discipline's aim is for strengthening us all the more under opposition as the day of Christ draws near. Paul knows though that human effort is insufficient to change us and for all the hard work that we might expend we may actually not change our sinful natures by ourselves.

After all he said earlier on in verse 2 that not all people have faith of course. But God is faithful as he made clear in verse 3 and that's why he closes as he does with the prayers of verses 16 and 18.

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you. He prays three things all of which are fruit of the gospel.

He prays for peace which comes from the gospel that reconciles people to God and people to people. He prays that they know the presence of God which is only the fruit of the gospel that brings us into the presence of God the Father.

And he prays for grace in verse 18 which of course is the oil of the gospel that makes it work. But in praying for peace and presence and grace having urged people to exercise discipline in love and to be hard working Paul is reminding us here that in effect God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

[34 : 55] God's gospel does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God's grace does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. So no wonder all the way through this chapter if not this letter in not these letters and New Testament as a whole is the concern for the spread of the gospel and the glory of God.

Far more important in the end than just human effort and achievement. That driving force and priority must be ours as well. For the day of the Lord is coming soon.

The opposition is greater as we anticipate the man of lawlessness to come. So let us pray with Paul that the Lord of peace himself will give us peace at all times and in all ways.

That the Lord will be with all of us and that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of us. And we know that he will be for God is faithful.

Amen.