

Yale Bible Study

1 and 2 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians 3: Some Practical Advice

Spreading the Gospel (3:1-5)

These verses echo the first thanksgiving section of 2 Thessalonians (1:3-4) and that of 1 Thessalonians (1:7-10). Paul rejoices that the word has spread among the Thessalonians and prays their blessing that the Lord's word will continue to spread through his ministry. He reminds them that, like them, his ministry has been hindered by opposition and burdened by tribulation.

The other side of that comparison, of course, is that their tribulations reflect his own (v 2). Paul's prayer that God will guard them might mean "guard them from evil" but more likely means "guard them from the evil one" (v 3). Apocalyptic literature of this time included a strong dualism, the belief that the world was the battleground between good and evil and more concretely between God and his angels and Satan and his minions. We see this not only in Paul but in the gospels. The parable of Mark 4:15 talks about Satan taking away the word—very much as our letter pictures Satan opposing the word of the gospel. In John 13:2 and Luke 22:3 Satan enters the heart of Judas, causing him to betray Jesus. For these early Christians, there are many opponents but the opposition has a leader.

In good parenetic or teaching, fashion Paul encourages the Thessalonians to behave rightly by assuring them that he knows they are doing just that—all he asks is that their faithfulness increase continually (v 4). In the next verses, he will spell out more explicitly what the commands are that he wants them to (continue) to follow.

When Paul prays that God direct their hearts to the “love of God and the steadfastness of Christ” (v 5), he could mean either God’s love for them and Christ’s steadfastness toward them, or he could mean their love toward God and steadfastness toward Christ. Of course, there is no doubt that he would have prayed for both.

In the middle of this paragraph there is a nice play on words that the NRSV captures quite well. Paul is referring to the evil people “For not all have faith” and then contrasts them with God’s own self “But God is faithful” (v 3). At the heart of the gospel and of this epistle’s confidence is not simply the faith of people---or even the spread of the word, but the faithfulness of God.

Warning against idleness (3:6-14)

Strikingly the initial exhortation here is not simply not to be idle, but to avoid people who are (v 6). Paul seems to have in mind some kind of church discipline similar to that that Jesus commends in Matthew 18, where Christians take responsibility for the behavior of their brothers and sisters. The response to inappropriate behavior is that the faithful should “keep away” from those who act inappropriately (v 6). In somewhat similar manner in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul exhorts the Corinthian Christians to discipline a church member who is having sexual relations with his stepmother. The community is to gather and expel the offender from their fellowship.

In Matthew 18 and probably in 2 Corinthians 5, the hope is that the offenders may repent and be restored to community. In a similar way, Paul tells the Thessalonians that their job is to shame the offenders into penitence. Unlike Satan and unlike those who harass and persecute the church, these people are not to be opposed as enemies but to be chastened and corrected as brothers and sisters.

As in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, Paul uses his own example as the grounds for encouraging the Thessalonians to work with their own hands and not depend on the labor of others. The longest description of Paul's desire to make his living by his own hands is in 1 Corinthians 9. From Paul's defensive remarks in 2 Corinthians 11:5–11, it is clear that some of his opponents thought that this independence, which he considers a mark of honor, is really a mark of shame. In both cases he defends his willingness to work as an appropriate mark of his apostleship.

Here and in 1 Thessalonians there is not an argument based on the rights of apostleship, but there is considerable emphasis on the way in which Paul can be an example (v 9) for the Thessalonian believers. He does so by being unwilling to eat bread he has not earned by the work of his own hands (v 8). Paul's example is reinforced with a pithy proverb, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (v 10), a bit of wisdom often cited in other contexts!

We can only guess what the exact circumstances are that Paul here criticizes, and we can only guess how he has received this information. If this is a genuine letter written shortly after 1 Thessalonians, he has learned not only of the reception of that letter but of other circumstances in the church. Among those circumstances is the sad fact that the laziness condemned in 1 Thessalonians seems only to have grown by the time of 2 Thessalonians. If this is a later letter by another hand, then a mid-first century problem has only deepened toward the end of the century.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:2, the NRSV has the author denying the false claim that "The Day of the Lord has come." However, it is probably more appropriate to translate the phrase "the day of the Lord is at hand." Then the author goes on to list the conditions that still need to be fulfilled before the arrival of the end. In our verses, it seems that some of the Thessalonian

believers may be relying on the industry of their fellows while they themselves take it easy for what they think will be a very short time of waiting.

In the light of a mistaken conviction that the coming of the Day of the Lord devalues the obligations of everyday life, perhaps some brothers and sisters have decided that it is more blessed to receive than to give. For whatever reason, it seems that most members of the community are working hard (but not all) and that the reason or at least the rationalization for this behavior is what our author thinks is a mistaken eschatology.

When in v. 6 Paul refers to “the tradition” that the Thessalonians have received from him we may find a slight hint that his admonitions have already become part of a tradition—so that we have here the words of a later writer. Or it may be that he has himself been passing on a tradition—based either in Jesus’ teaching or in the Old Testament—that the faithful should work for what they eat.

The word translated “busybodies” in v. 11 seems to suggest that the issue is not simply that some are not working but that they are using the time they have on their hands to meddle in the affairs of others. Idle hands make busybodies. Or, if you really mind your own business (do your own business) you won’t have time to be a busybody.

Final greetings and benediction (1:16-17)

Paul ends the letter as he begins with the prayer for peace, for shalom. Abraham Malherbe probably rightly suggests that the language is the language of the benediction at the Christian assembly and that Paul provides the comforting echoes of liturgical blessing---at the end of a section which has continued mostly warning and admonition. The liturgical tone of the passage is evident in the three times repeated uses of the Greek *pas*— “every” or “all”.

“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at **all** times in **all** ways. The Lord be with **all** of you” (v 16).

The Lord may either be God the Father or Jesus the Lord. In either case what characterizes the Lord is here the giver of peace. That may be a word both of comfort and exhortation as a conclusion to the suggestions for church discipline that precede.

The final verses (17–18) suggest that the letter has been dictated and signed only at the end by the apostle in his own hand. As we have said, this emphasis may represent Paul’s attempt to counter the false letter or the false interpretation of 1 Thessalonians that has encouraged the Thessalonians to believe that the end time is at hand. Or this may be a clever device by a follower of Paul to give authenticity to a letter not really written by Paul but written to apply “Pauline” principles to a new time and a new situation.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Nijay Gupta, “An Apocalyptic Reading of Psalm 78 in 2 Thessalonians 3,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (2008) 179–94.

Dorothy Jean Weaver, “2 Thessalonians 3:6–15,” *Interpretation* 61 (2007) 426–28.

Questions for Discussion:

1. In both the letters to the Thessalonians the appeal to faithful behavior rests in part on the expectation that the Day of the Lord is near, or very near. In most of our churches that expectation has faded or been reinterpreted. Are there ways in which we can still lay

hold of the strong expectation of our letters, or ways in which we can seek to be faithful but with a different vision of Christian hope?

2. In this chapter, the author clearly instructs the Thessalonians how to discipline those who are slack in their responsibilities. Those who do not work should not eat. Is there still a place for strict church discipline in our congregations? If so, how might that work in ways that are faithful to the implications of the gospel?
3. How do we understand the injunctions against busybodies in a time when social media blur the distinction between the private and the public, between my business and yours?
4. The letter begins as it ends, with a hope for “grace” and “peace.” Can you think of concrete ways in which grace and peace might be manifest in your life or the life of your faith community?