

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Christian Life in Difficult Times: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:18

In recent years when the British army has gone into a war situation a reoccurring concern has been voiced on each occasion – “Do they have the right equipment and support for the conflict?”

It is essential that as Christians we have the right equipment for the conflict: the whole armour of God, Ephesians 6:11 - and that we are connected to the right person for vital support while living in the enemy's land: our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 Thessalonians 3:18.

In last week's talk, on 2 Thessalonians 1:1-2:12, the Apostle Paul had warned about Satan and his deceit as he seeks to keep people away from God and the truth. This will be especially true when the church of God has been taken out of this world and the Spirit of God is no longer here in His current capacity. Today we will see once again how Paul seeks to warn and encourage the Thessalonians about issues which, if unchecked, would cause real problems.

Encouragement to remain faithful

Paul now turns to give encouragement to the Thessalonians and contrasts their lives with those previously mentioned as being deceived. “But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord”, verse 13. Paul and those with him had by now considerable acquaintance with the Christians at Thessalonica so that they could not contain the joy they found in them. They expressed their gratitude to God for the continuance of the Thessalonian believers in the Christian life.

1 Thessalonians 1 gives graphic detail of the tremendous change in their lives and the amazing testimony their changed lives had upon others. Paul was continually giving thanks to God for them. Paul further adds that they were greatly appreciated by the Lord. The Lord appreciated their steadfastness as Christians. Does this challenge our hearts? Does the Lord find great appreciation in how I live?

However, this appreciation stemmed from the great work undertaken by the Spirit and their believing: “brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth”, verse 13. Their blessing was the work of God who chose them with the Spirit of God working in their lives, stirring their hearts to make them realise their lost condition and need of a Saviour. When the Gospel of the grace of God was proclaimed there was a response in their hearts which caused them to believe the message of salvation, to confess that they were sinners and that forgiveness is found only in Christ. Paul and his companions were the preachers of this good news, verse 14.

The Gospel convicts us of our sin and shows us that we are lost and unable to recover ourselves to God's satisfaction and that we have become enemies of God. The acceptance of God's salvation through faith in Christ not only brings forgiveness and nearness but holds out to us a future day of glory with Christ, “The obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”, verse 14. This is tremendous good news! No wonder Paul gives thanks to God for them. No wonder these redeemed people were loved by the Lord. We might say that Jesus is anxiously waiting the moment when they will be with Him in glory.

Paul, having reminded them of their blessing in Christ Jesus, now seeks to give further encouragement. “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle”, verse 15. Paul uses the expression “stand fast” in a military sense, i.e. to hold one's ground, not to give up but to persevere especially in the face of opposition and difficulty. The holding to traditions is here used in a good sense and not as the Jews who had made their own rituals to supersede in some cases the word of God, see Colossians 2:8, “the traditions of men”. Paul is referring to what the Thessalonians had been taught by word or letter from Paul and fellow believers. His words are a warning to us: are we following scriptural traditions or traditions of men?

Paul once again commends them into the loving care of both the Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father: “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work”, verses 16-17. There is not a better place for believers to be than under the care of such divine persons who have only our full blessing in view.

The comfort and expectation that a Christian has is because of the wonderful favour of God towards us. But there is a further intention in these verses, that the Thessalonians might be made constant, always reliable, in every good word and work, so that each day their words and activities would be consistent with the will of God. Again, we see Paul in very simple terms challenging the Thessalonians and, by extension ourselves, to live out to the full our Christianity.

Request for prayer

Chapter 3 opens with these wonderful words, "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you." Does it not touch our hearts that people such as Paul and his companions desired prayer to be made on their behalf? It highlights the essential value of prayer. It has often been said in my life time, that you can tell how well any company of God's people are doing by noting how many believers attend the prayer meeting and how frequently prayer gatherings are convened. The effectiveness of Christian testimony in any location is directly related to being prayer dependent. But, we should not limit prayer to our own local circumstances, vital though that is. We should expand our horizons and pray for servants of God in other localities.

What was the purpose for this request for prayer? There was a double reason, "That the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you, and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith". Primarily Paul desired freedom for the "word of the Lord". That the full word, the total revelation of God's intentions as found in the Scriptures might go out to the world quickly. This word belongs to the Lord. Therefore, by implication we must be careful how we handle it. I don't mean how we pick up our copy of the Bible, I mean how we read, speak from, quote and use the Scriptures. We are warned a number of times not to add to or take away from the Scriptures. Additionally, Paul desired that the word of the Lord be glorified, to be honoured and acknowledged for what it is, "The word of the Lord." The Scriptures are not just another book or religious book. The Scriptures in the original languages are the very words from God, see 2 Timothy 3:16, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God".

The second request was to do with Paul and his companions being kept safe: "That we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith". Faith is that essential ingredient in order to accept that the Scriptures are the word of the Lord and to believe for personal salvation. There is no middle ground in relation to this matter - you either are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ accepting God's message of salvation and all its implications or you are counted among those who are "unreasonable and wicked men".

Paul's confidence in the Thessalonians

Paul's thoughts turn once again to the Thessalonians, "But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one", verse 3. If there are lies and deception all around, the Lord ever remains faithful. Like the Thessalonians, we today are encouraged when we are reminded that the Lord seeks to encourage, to make us strong and at the same time to provide protection from the evil one. The phrase "the evil one" is most likely a title referring to Satan. Paul had confidence in the Lord concerning the Thessalonians, see verse 4, that they would hold to and put into practice that which Paul had taught them. Are we taking account of God's word and putting its teaching into practice? This challenge was real 2,000 years ago and it is just as real today. Paul in verse 5 directs their attention to the Lord, the person who would set their hearts upon the perfect love of God and to the patience or constancy of Christ. Paul reminds them of this love of God because of the issues he now needs to bring to their attention. As they are exhorted to deal with the issues it must ever be with the love of God in mind. Likewise in referring to the constancy of Christ, Paul would have them to remain true to his commandments as the word of the Lord.

Avoid the disorderly

Paul now brings to their attention some practical points about Christian behaviour. At first glance, they do not seem to be of a serious nature, such as, being disorderly, always looking for a free meal, not working and being busybodies. Although they appear to be minor issues, they are the kind of things that over time would cause irritation in the Christian fellowship and present a bad image to non Christians. However, Paul considers these matters to be so serious that Christians are to have nothing to do with fellow believers who behave in this way. Verse 6 states, "But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us".

Note the seriousness of the word, "withdraw". The harshness of the action albeit in love, is to wake up those Christians who have either fallen into this kind of behaviour or maybe they are living like they did before being saved. Paul wants them to change and change quickly to prevent major difficulties arising. Disorderly means being out of step with other Christians and the teaching which Paul and others had delivered to them. When it comes to the Scriptures, there is no compromise and no room for individual rights to live as one likes. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Master. He is to be obeyed; and we obey by taking heed to the word of God. Paul further adds that if they were unsure how to behave then they only had to think back and remember how Paul and his fellow companions lived. Verse 7, "For you

yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you". Here were people who had lived among the Thessalonians and had clearly demonstrated Christian living - they were examples.

Paul then goes on to another specific point: "nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labour and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us", verses 8-9. The Scriptures are clear as to hospitality towards the servants of the Lord. But Paul did not take up this right. Maybe his spiritual insight understood how this privilege could be abused, and sadly some of the Thessalonians had done just that. What did Paul do? He worked, along with his companions, providing for themselves and showed how to live right. Paul made himself an example for them to follow. Sadly today there are so many, whether true Christians or not - I do not know, but their behaviour in this type of matter and other issues simply brings dishonour to Christ and Christians in general. It damages the testimony. Dear saints of God, we have to be so careful how we live!

Paul goes on to say that he not only became an example of how to live but taught as verse 10 states, "For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat". So by word and action Paul demonstrated true Christian behaviour. Being work shy is not a Christian virtue, it's a vice. We must say that those who are genuinely incapacitated are not included in what Paul is teaching and demonstrating.

In this next verse we see where idleness and disorderly behaviour leads. "For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies", verse 11. It is sad when wrong things become talked about. Idleness etc was becoming a known thing among the Thessalonians and that was not good. Once a bad reputation becomes established it is almost impossible to reverse and it is likely to render the Christian testimony in that location, ineffective. There is a saying that, "the devil finds work for idle hands". By not working, these Christians became people who meddled and were disruptive in the affairs of others.

So Paul stresses the need for immediate reform, "Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread", verse 12. We see how seriously Paul takes this kind of unchristian behaviour. As both a command and an exhortation, Paul leaves no room for doubt as to his intention to reform the behaviour of those in the Christian company who were idle. They were to find employment or, if they had employment, concentrate on it and stop being a busybody. Go about your occupation quietly and eat your own meals for which you have worked.

We can see how relevant this kind of teaching is today. Our government is constantly seeking ways to return people to employment. There may be very sound medical reasons why a person is incapable of continuing with their chosen occupation but retraining to an alternative employment is often possible. It almost goes without saying that a Christian should be exploring all possible avenues of retraining or job hunting, should they be unfortunate enough to be unemployed. For the Thessalonians, and for us today, it is that we might not become a burden to others and that our spare time might not degenerate into unprofitable activity. Spare time can be used profitably for the Lord, but not as busybodies!

Practical Christian living

If Paul seeks to correct wrong attitudes to employment, he also balances his tough line with words of encouragement to the Christians at Thessalonica who were living faithful and godly lives. "But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good." verse 13. It may well be implied in the words "But as for you", that those who were idle as mentioned in the previous verses may not have all been Christians, but had detected in the Christian company the opportunity for a free meal from people who showed love and kindness to the less fortunate. So Paul encourages them not to grow weary in doing what was right. This is a message for us today that we show out our Christianity by doing good works. Part of good works may well be helping others to live right, find employment, take responsibility for their lives, etc. Paul continues by saying that it is not always the right way to let people, even Christians, abuse our love and kindness. So in verse 14 he states that they can cut off such people who ignore the exhortation given, "And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed". Notice that this extreme action is to cause shame, that is, to cause the person to change their behaviour. The phrase "be ashamed" could be translated "to turn about". So we see the intention of Paul's strong words is to have a corrective result. Paul wanted the Christians at Thessalonica to be "as wise as serpents and harmless as doves", see Matthew 10:16. There is the mistaken belief among some Christians that we throw away common sense when we accept the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour. The Lord's own words in Matthew 10 clearly indicate that this is not to be so. However, the converse is also true - that we do not retain our old way of living: self pleasing, scheming, lying, etc. Such behaviour is to stop and is no longer welcome. We are to embrace the characteristics or fruit of the Holy Spirit as found in Galatians 5:22-23: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control."

If there are any doubts as to Paul's true intention in dealing with the above problem people, he states quite clearly in verse 15, "Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." So the whole purpose is recovery and restoration to true Christian behaviour. This is a general principle seen in regards to any Christian person failing or sinning - their fellow Christians should be seeking their recovery.

Concluding blessing

As Paul ends his letter he brings them back to their Lord and Saviour. We have covered a few things which appeared to be minor by nature but had they gone unchecked they would have eventually caused real serious problems. The peace of the Christian assembly would have been shattered. It's the "Humpty-dumpty" syndrome. All the kings men could not put Humpty-dumpty back together again! Once peace has been broken, can it be restored? Yes, it is possible but it takes a lot of effort. It is far better not to break it, in the first place. So in verse 16 Paul states, "Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord be with you all." Paul wants them to keep close to the Lord, to seek to be guided by their Master who is the "Lord of peace".

Then Paul indicates that the letter is genuine because he has written the closing greeting in his own handwriting. "The salutation of Paul with my own hand, which is a sign in every epistle; so I write", verse 17. Paul had to clearly show that the letter was written by him because people pretended to be Paul and wrote letters which were wrong, containing false information and teaching. Paul had already referred to this, see 2:2. The enemy would seek by all means to cause disruption in the Christian company. It was true then; it is still the same today. Dear Christian, always be watchful and alert! Finally, Paul commends the Thessalonians to "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen." With these words he closes his letter to them.

In closing I quote a verse from Charlotte Elliott's poem,

*Christian, seek not yet repose,
Cast thy dreams of ease away;
Thou art in the midst of foes:
Watch and pray.*

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