

# Lessons on Thessalonians

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*Dedication*

To our friends from the Becoming Closer class, for their constant encouragement and support.

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## First Thessalonians

### The Church by Example - 1 Thessalonians 1

Writing to an exemplary church in Macedonia, Paul in these letters outlines for us much of the doctrine concerning the second coming of the Lord. In doing so, he shows us the kind of church against which Satan makes a sophisticated attack. We shall see both the church and her hope in these two letters.

#### Character of the church

**Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention *of you* in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, *His* choice of you;**

#### (1Th 1:1-4 NASB)

#### The church's relationship to God

The first thing to note is the preposition: "in." Paul here lays emphasis upon the fact that the true church is *in* God the Father and Jesus Christ. Like most of the early churches, the Thessalonian church suffered persecution, both from the Jews and the Roman Empire. It is easy, then, to picture them hiding under the wings of God. He is our comfort; he is our shelter. A church in pride will try to be her own rock against the storms; the church in humility builds upon the solid Rock of Ages. It is interesting to note that the church then was much more greatly persecuted than in our day, yet the church today is much more vigorous in defending herself. Could it be that we have chosen the wrong rock?

You will note that this church, hiding herself in the Lord, is beloved by God. It seems a curious thought to non-Christians, but Christians know that God *wants* us to depend upon him, not upon ourselves. We must do what we can do – but always trusting God for the results. He loves us, and never more than when we are under his wings.

We have preached self-reliance so long to ourselves that we have forgotten the sweetness of God's sovereign choice. He has chosen us, in Christ, to become his children. Christ our brother, God our father – he has chosen us into the family of God. We are his because he wants us to be.

#### Outward signs of the church

Have you ever moved to a new city? Then you know that your first weeks are spent finding things: where's the post office, which market has the best prices, etc. If you are wise, one such search will be for your new church home. Some will select this by the sign on the door; others will listen for the eloquence of the preacher; others will regard the size as being most important. May I suggest that there are surer signs?

- ✚ First, you should look for the *work of faith*. The phrase seems self-contradictory, but it is not. Faith shows itself in works. Look for those churches who pray consistently, for example. Look for those things the world calls useless, which God deems precious.
- ✚ Next you should see the *labor of love*. Do they feed the hungry? Visit the sick and in prison? When they do, is it done cheerfully? Indeed, are they forgiving?
- ✚ Finally, is their hope really in Christ? Do they look forward to our Lord's imminent return? Or do they completely ignore prophecy?

#### Praying for the church

Now that you have found such a church, you must support and sustain it – especially in prayer. Paul shows us here his prayers for the church in Thessalonica:

- ✚ He begins with *thanksgiving*. Such a church is precious to God, and a blessing to his saints. Thank him for your church.
- ✚ He asks for *grace*. The grace of God is intrinsically linked to his forgiveness. A church living in God's grace is not only forgiven, but forgiving. Such a church reaches out to those who are the fallen of our world, such as the criminals, those addicted to drugs and those whose lifestyles have born the pain of sin.
- ✚ He asks for *peace*. Though many think the church grows fastest under persecution, the process of making disciples is best done in a time of peace – for in that time the faithful may reach deeply into God's word.

#### The Power of Example

**for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.**

#### (1Th 1:5-7 NASB)

#### The coming of the Good News

The preaching and teaching of the Gospel (the word means "good news") is done rather gently in our place and time. If you want to be a nationally known preacher, writer or teacher, your message should be as inoffensive as possible. No one goes to hell; they have a "Christ-less eternity." The teaching is about how God can meet your needs in your daily life; the Cross is now in the background. Compare this method with Paul's description of how the Thessalonians heard the Good News:

- ✚ The Good News came in *power*. In the original, it's the word from which we get our word, "dynamite." Paul is speaking not just of the miraculous, but of the total change in life which comes over those who truly believe.
- ✚ The Good News came in with the *Holy Spirit*. Those who received the Holy Spirit knew it; those who were around them found out about it quickly enough. The whole basis of life had changed.
- ✚ The Good News came with *full conviction*. It is the function of the Spirit to convince the world of sin and judgment – and when you know you're a sinner, the Good News is very good indeed.

### Successive Imitation

Ask your children, they'll tell you: nothing is so instructive and convincing as your example. We may note how this works:

- ✦ The point clearly begins with the character of the Apostles. Paul makes it clear that the imitation started because he and his companions *proved* themselves to be what they claimed to be. This was a town where Paul worked nights as a tent maker to support himself for the day's preaching. You cannot long fool anyone.
- ✦ The result was first this: the Thessalonians began by imitating the Paul they could see. Effective teaching always includes the example. (Even if your life has been one of sin, you can always use yourself as a bad example.)
- ✦ Because Paul was imitating his Lord, the Thessalonians soon figured it out: their ultimate example was Jesus, God in the flesh. By imitating the Paul they had seen, they began to imitate the Jesus they had not.

### An example to others

Nothing so pleases a teacher of the Scripture as to see that his students are imitating the Lord Jesus Christ – to the point of being an example to others. See how thoroughly they did this:

- ✦ They did it first to those nearby – in the same city, in the same province. But later the word spread, as many of these people moved to other cities. The process repeats itself to this day.
- ✦ Note, please, that this happened during tribulation – persecution, if you will. It is politically incorrect to be a Christian today. Many companies will not allow a known Christian on their payroll. It is in time of persecution that the character of the example is best seen.
- ✦ A curious result is shown: joy. The church, in tribulation, shelters under the wings of God – and God, through the Holy Spirit, gives them joy. Joy? Indeed, the sweet joy of knowing that the times are tough – but as trials abound, so does grace. The Spirit is our comforter, and that brings joy.

Paul records for us just how this worked for the Thessalonians:

Now, brethren, we *wish to* make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, *they gave* of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and *this*, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

(2Co 8:1-5 NASB)

(Thessalonica was the capital city of Macedonia.)

### Results

For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *that is* Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

(1Th 1:8-10 NASB)

### Sounded forth

One solid measure of a church is its program of evangelism. See here the character such evangelism should have:

- ✚ The first thing is this: it must “sound forth.” The word in the original carries a meaning of something loud and strong – sufficient that you can hear it echoing back. Our evangelism should echo back, not get lost in the traffic noise.
- ✚ First, it goes out locally. Unless you’re on an island without a paddle, there are those around who need to hear the word. This is the task of every Christian.
- ✚ But as a church together, we also have the responsibility to send the word to all the world. Each church, like this one, should send out missionaries at long range. We don’t know if they sent people like Paul, or simply used those who were going that way – both should be done.

### Ourselves as examples

Read between the lines with me. Paul tells them that the churches they started have themselves reported on the reception the Thessalonians gave Paul. This tells us something: the Thessalonians testified about themselves as a part of their evangelism.

- ✚ They told the story of their own conversion – of how Paul had brought the Gospel to them. Thus they became witnesses for Christ.
- ✚ They were not ashamed to tell of their own sins – in this instance, idol worship. The sinner is sent to the sinner; from the cattle boats you came, to the cattle boats you will return.
- ✚ By their example they showed that they had turned from sin to the service of God. It is an example for us today.

### Eyes on the prize

At the core of the evangelist’s heart is the sure knowledge of Christ. If you want to hit the target, you will need something to aim at. The Thessalonians were set upon hitting the target:

- ✚ They had seized the core of the message: the truth of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord. There is no substitute for this; no amount of chatter and sweet talk will replace the gory truth of the Cross. How firm a foundation!
- ✚ They looked ahead – to the target. Christ will some day return to claim his own – and to judge the living and the dead. When that blessed day comes, these Christians will be among those who receive the “Well done” of God. Know what you’re aiming at!
- ✚ While we await his return, we should not be idle. Patience is not idleness; patience is an active word. When he returns, he should find us doing what we are supposed to be doing.

I cannot forbear to add this: on that great day, the Thessalonians will arise from their graves. They will testify to the horrible tribulations they had – far worse than anything we have seen. They will show that they reached out with the Gospel to those around, both near and far. Their works will show them to be true Christians. Look around you and ask: will we be able to say the same?

## Building Blocks - 1 Thessalonians 2

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. This we know, this we sing, this we believe. But have you ever considered some of the building blocks Christ uses in his church?

### Men of Integrity

For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition. For our exhortation does not *come* from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts. For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed--God is witness-- nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing *mother* tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, *how* working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and *so is* God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we *were* exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father *would* his own children, so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

### (1Th 2:1-12 NASB)

What kind of men does God use to build his church?

### Boldness

It is the chief characteristic of those who plant new churches: boldness. It takes a fair amount of courage to go door to door, inviting others to hear the Word. The reason most of us don't have this boldness is fairly simple: we know we're going to be met with opposition. What, then, is the Christian to do about this opposition?

- ✚ *Expect it.* We are clearly taught that anyone who loves Christ wholeheartedly will face opposition and even persecution. This should not be a surprise to us.
- ✚ *Prepare for it.* Since you know you're going to be opposed, you should be prepared. Prayer and meditation for the soul, worship and praise for the spirit, studying the Scriptures for the mind – all these prepare all of you.
- ✚ *Don't give in to it.* You know who has won the battle. Sometimes you will be stubbornly refused. When (not if) that happens, shake dust and move on.

### The message is pure

Paul, by example, gives us the characteristics of anyone who wants to spread the Good News. The key to the evangelical personality is purity. If you keep yourself pure, you make yourself the willing instrument of God.

- ✚ There must be no *error* in what you say. Linus to the contrary notwithstanding, it does matter what you believe. If you don't know what you believe, how can you teach others? If your beliefs are inconsistent, how will you convince others? Therefore, study the Scriptures diligently and often.
- ✚ There must be no *deceit* in your words. There are plenty of swindlers out there, leading others astray for profit. The world expects such; make it clear you are not one.
- ✚ You must have no desire for self-glorification. The example is set before us: Paul, though an Apostle of God, specially called to teach the Gentiles, does not use this authority for his own personal pomp. Rather, he humbled himself (as his Lord did) – and so became an example to them.

### Sharing their very lives

In the world of the computer geek there is an acronym: WYSIWYG. It's pronounced "whizzy wig"; it stands for "what you see is what you get." It is important that we live that way; the Christian term for it is "integrity." If you are living behind the mask, it's time you discarded it. God's work is done by the honest, for God's word is truth.

But this is not sufficient; you must reach out with your whole heart. You may be an honest miser, for example – but that's not going to help those in need. Your Lord commands both honesty and charity. Money collected in the plate will do some good. Sharing your life with someone is a much greater charity – and a much greater joy.

Paul tells us as much here. He had such an affection for these Christians that he not only shared the Gospel with them, but his whole life. He "walked the talk," as we might say.

### Hard work

In the last half of the nineteenth century many churches had no paid minister on staff. It was considered by many to be an admission that not one of the people in that church was capable of handling the truth. The view is somewhat extreme today, but it carries a germ of truth in it. Let's look at an example:

Minister A and Minister B come to town to establish a church. Minister A immediately rounds up several believers, forms a committee and draws a salary so that he might continue the work of evangelism.

Minister B starts by finding a place to work, to support himself. His church starts slowly, for he has less time to reach others. But those whom he does reach are impressed by the example he sets.

I think you can see that Minister A may look good, but his concern for his paycheck handicaps him; people can see his first priority. Minister B's congregation can see his priorities too. Of course, the resolution of this problem is simple (and Paul used it): the evangelist is sent (and paid) from another church elsewhere.

### Like a father pities his children

The man of God should not be a blind guide. Paul gives us three ways in which the man of God should guide his flock:

- ✚ *Encouragement.* Every one has troubles; the man of God should be there to provide the comfort of one who speaks on God's behalf.
- ✚ *Exhortation.* Interestingly, this word in the Greek carries the idea of one who is beseeching – not commanding. The man of God should not hesitate to bring the truth of Christ.
- ✚ *Imploring.* The word in the original means “to bear witness.” The man of God should use his experience – good or bad – as evidence to convince the sinner.

### The Word of God

For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted *it* not *as* the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they *did* from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.

### (1Th 2:13-16 NASB)

#### Its Divine character

There is no getting past it: the word of God is a two-edged sword. We see in our own time various denominations splitting over the use of Scripture. We cannot in this lesson take the time to go through all the details of this, but we should note these two details:

- ✚ First, that the Scripture is inspired by God. Opinion varies on what “inspired” means – but it certainly implies that this book is like no other. In it can be found the words of life eternal.
- ✚ Second, we are clearly warned that it is complete – not to be tampered with or added to.

#### The imitation of Christ

The word of God is powerful in human lives:

- ✚ It provokes us to repentance – and so saves us from the wrath to come.
- ✚ It guides us by showing examples.
- ✚ It provides for us the right words in time of trouble (see Psalm 23).

#### Always opposed

One of the surest tests of the authenticity of the Scriptures is this: the world opposes the word.

- ✚ The world will oppose anyone who tells the Good News. Restrictions on the preaching of the word are commonplace now. Around the world there are countries that make it a capital offense. But even here we feel the social pressure to shut up – and the onslaught of lawsuits designed to prevent the spread of the Good News.

- ✚ Indeed, the church is rejected by the powers of this world – and with good reason. The Lord of the church, Jesus the Christ, intends that we should have no other gods before him. The governments are sure that they have a better way, and it would be so convenient if Christians would just go away.
- ✚ But the word is not only opposed here; it is opposed everywhere. Even the missionary who would go to where the Gospel needs to be heard is now condemned as someone “who is robbing science of the opportunity to study this ancient culture.” The world’s view is that all religions are equally true (i.e., equally false). Therefore, you shouldn’t evangelize people – it will upset their culture.

Finally, the word of God, the Bible, stands as the measure God will use at Christ’s return. Those who oppose the word will be judged by the Word.

### The Hope of the Soon Return

**But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while--in person, not in spirit--were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. For we wanted to come to you--I, Paul, more than once--and *yet* Satan hindered us. For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.**

(1Th 2:17-20 NASB)

The third building block we shall see is this: hope. Since the days of the Apostles the church has hoped for, believed in and looked forward to the “soon return” of the Lord, Jesus the Christ. We can understand this on two levels:

- ✚ If you’ve been to the funeral of a Christian, you know that the hope of the resurrection is a central part of the faith. We are commanded to comfort each other with the thought that at the return, this one we loved so much will be raised from the dead, just as Christ was.
- ✚ More than just those we love, we see in this event the coming of the Lord we love. It will be a day of wrath for many; old injustices will finally be judged. It is the day when righteousness and mercy will meet and kiss.

In this life, however, the hope of Christ is attacked. Paul puts his finger on the villain: Satan.

- ✚ Satan attacks that hope when we are in physical pain. When you are suffering right now, it’s hard to look ahead to glory.
- ✚ Satan attacks in times of emotional turmoil. When you are reacting instead of thinking, it’s difficult to see the joy to come.
- ✚ Satan attacks in your seasons of doubt. When things don’t go as you planned, and you begin to ask God, “Why me?”, the resurrection looks to be far away and long in coming.

The answer to all these attacks is the same: press on. You have a goal set before you, a crown of life. On that day your hope will become sight. All your labors for Christ will be rewarded. It will be a day of joy as we greet each other again; it will be a day of glory for our Lord.

## **Pains in Persecution - 1 Thessalonians 3**

Paul evidently wrote this letter from the city of Athens. Thessalonica is a few hundred miles to the east; just enough distance in those days to make a return trip something of an adventure. Paul himself is undergoing persecution by the Jews of Athens, but it is typical of the caring Christian heart of the man that he is concerned not by his own sufferings but by others. The church he loves may have gotten word of Paul's problem, and might be suffering doubt and anxiety. So in his anxiety he sends a young Timothy to that church. Timothy has returned with good news; all is well. This chapter is Paul's reaction.

First, however, we need to consider persecution and suffering for Christ's sake.

### **Persecution – and our reaction to it**

Christians in America have yet to suffer any really significant forms of persecution – but the telltale signs of its arrival can be determined. Already, Christianity is “politically incorrect.” How dare these Christians say that homosexuality, adultery, fornication – the list grows lengthy, folks – are in any sense wrong? Don't they know that right and wrong are obsolete concepts? Soon the time will come when Christians find that getting a job is difficult – who would hire someone who would commit violence against another, homosexual, employee? (They're all weirdos, right?).

Persecution in this time was much more severe – to the point of death. We can learn from this example how the Christian should react to it.

### **We should not be disturbed by persecution**

Most of us would be disturbed indeed by such, but the Scripture counsels us to the contrary. First, we should expect to be persecuted:

**Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.**

**(2Ti 3:12 NASB)**

Indeed, we should not only expect it, but we should consider it a blessing – for it shows that we are indeed the children of God:

**"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

**(Mat 5:10-12 NASB)**

Paul makes the same point to the Thessalonians – he taught them that persecution would come. That, however, does not make it easier to take. If your doctor tells you that you have cancer and very little time left because of it, you might feel relieved to know what the problem is. But it's still fatal. Knowing what's going to happen isn't the same as conquering it. But it's a start.

### Why are we so disturbed by it?

When persecution comes, many Christians feel that it is not a source of rejoicing but a source of pain. It's easy to see why. If you are a true Christian, you will live your life loving your fellow Christians, and those around you. You will be charitable, forgiving, and otherwise behave as one the world might label "a nice guy." One of the white hats, so to speak. In times of ease they're willing to overlook your strange notions about God because you seem both harmless and charitable – a blessing to the community. That sets expectations for us; we learn to expect to be treated both politely and well.

Indeed, we also receive that type of treatment from our heavenly Father, for God is love. So the ordinary experience of the true Christian does not prepare him for persecution. That's why the Scripture mentions the point so frequently. You need to be taught the existence of persecution and its intent *before* it arrives.

You are a source of blessing; you are also a painful reminder of the existence of right and wrong. The world in our time rejects righteousness, preferring its own darkness. We are the light of the world – and the darkness resents it and will persecute us when possible.

### What can we do to help those in persecution

One way to prepare for persecution is to help those who are suffering from it. By encouraging them we prepare ourselves for the same thing. Here are three ways we can do this:

- ✚ First, by sharing our own afflictions with them. We'll tell almost anyone about our success; our sorrows are reserved for those we hold dear. Share them with someone, and that person draws closer to you. Share your sorrows with those in persecution.
- ✚ Next, material help is always appreciated. Persecution often takes the form of economic impact – someone losing a job for Christ's sake. Practical Christian giving bonds us to such a person.
- ✚ Finally, and most important, lift them up in prayer. Do not ask that the persecution end; rather, that it will be a blessing and a glory to the church. God is so strong when we are so weak.

### A Father's Care

In this section of Scripture we shall see how Paul, enduring persecution, reached out to the church of Thessalonica.

Therefore when we could endure *it* no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we *kept* telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. For this reason, when I could endure *it* no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain. But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you, for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith; for now we *really* live, if you stand firm in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your

account, as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?

### (1Th 3:1-10 NASB)

The heart of the true Christian thinks first of others in the faith. It is a sign of great power in the faith and maturity of the soul. Paul here shows his concern for the works he has done; this church is one he planted and nurtured. It is not just his labor he is concerned with; no, these have become his friends and beloved. His concern is not that they uphold him; his concern is that they might be discouraged because of the suffering Paul is enduring. Paul now deals with this problem.

#### Satan attacks the ones you love

We usually think of Satan attacking us with temptation, if we think about it at all. But Satan can also attack a person by attacking a loved one. It's a very effective technique:

- ✚ First, it weakens you. Some part of the array of friends and loved ones you counted on is now weaker; you are not an island, living alone.
- ✚ Next, it discourages you. Particularly if the someone is a person you have admired, it is painful to see them in bad circumstances. It is important that you do not stop sharing with them, but it is discouraging to see someone you love in a hospital bed, for example.
- ✚ Finally, it distracts you. Just when you might be set to do some great service, something like this arises. It takes mature judgment, guided by prayer, to know what to do.

Of course, knowing the attack does not mean we know what to do about it.

#### Our reaction

What should we do about such a situation? Paul gives us an example here:

- ✚ First, of course, is to hold them up in prayer.
- ✚ Paul shows us something not often done these days. He sends someone he loves to inquire after the church he loves. If God does not allow you to go yourself, send someone you love.

The result of this is comfort, both for the one who is sending and for those who are receiving. Nothing so pleases us in affliction as the sight of an old friend.

#### The encouragement of good news

Sometimes you just have to find out. Paul, when he could "endure it no longer," sends Timothy to find out. What a joy when Timothy returns with the welcome news that they are standing firm! Paul's labor there had not turned useless, but had grown. It is a joyous moment.

On the personal side, it seems they've missed Paul as well, and would love to have him make the return voyage. Is there anything so welcome as that? Paul's worries that his troubles (including those with the law) might cause them to disown him have been relieved. There is nothing like knowing that your loved ones still love you.

#### Objectives

Paul, in writing about this, shows us why he cares so much for them. He knows God's plan for them. He shows this to us in one of his mid-letter closes – a benediction before the sermon has ended, so to speak:

Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also *do* for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

### (1Th 3:11-13 NASB)

#### Return direction

Paul, like the rest of us, has only a limited appetite for the new and unfamiliar. He'd like to return to see his friends. But in saying that, he tells us clearly that the life of the disciple is not one in which the pilgrim determines the path:

- ✚ He acknowledges that God himself directs his path. It's no use asking God for a return ticket to comfort; it's not going to happen. Rather, ask that your steps be ordered pleasantly in the way.
- ✚ If God determines that path, he will clear the obstacles from it. Indeed, this is often the method by which God makes it clear that he is pointing the way.
- ✚ If he points out the path, and clears the path, then we should be neither hesitant nor ashamed to walk on it – wherever it goes. Paul saw his own martyrdom at the end of his road. He walked on it anyway.

“All the way my Savior leads me, what have I to ask beside?”

#### Abound in love

Next, Paul asks that his readers should abound in love. Love is the unconquerable weapon of the Christian. Against it, Satan has no defense – only distraction.

- ✚ First, we should abound in love for each other. This builds up the church, which builds us as well. It also shows the world what it means to be a disciple of Christ.
- ✚ Next, we should abound in love for those who are sent from us, like Paul was here. Our love should include our Christian brothers in all places.
- ✚ Finally, working outward, is our love for all people. Make it the normal method of dealing with people.

#### Eye on the prize

All this is not just to get us through the day. There is an ultimate purpose to this: our Lord's return. By such encouragement as we have seen here – for both Paul and the church at Thessalonica – we strengthen our hearts to go forward. We know of our Lord's return; together we can strengthen each other looking towards that day.

We are to be holy – kept apart, a people who serve God rather than the pleasures of this world. We ought to be different, for our Master is different.

How long? – to the end of the age, should we live to see it.

#### Summary

Persecution: it's to be expected as a Christian, counted as joy when it comes – and a time where sharing love really counts. Satan will attack us in it; using the weapons of God (prayer and love) and the things of this world (practical help) we can provide the encouragement needed to overcome. All this is

so that we might be filled to overflowing with love as we live here – and that we might be seen holy and blameless on the Day of the Lord.

## Astonishing Doctrine - 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Don Quixote had it easy. All he had to do was engage windmills in combat. The Bible teacher must teach against adultery.

### Paul's Appeal

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. For you know what commandments we gave you by *the authority of* the Lord Jesus.

### (1Th 4:1-2 NASB)

In happier days the teacher could skip over this. But I find it necessary to begin this section by bringing to your attention the way in which Paul makes his appeal to the Thessalonians – who are, by the way, well spoken of as Christians. Pretend that you don't know what's coming, and see how Paul prepares these people for the command he is to give.

### How he asks

There are three things I would point out regarding the method by which Paul is to make his point:

- ✚ He “requests” them. The word in the Greek can also be translated “beseech”. Note that he does not command them; he asks.
- ✚ He “exhorts” them. The word in the original carries a picture of someone coming along side you, encouraging you to what is good.
- ✚ He does not command them, as an Apostle – rather he places the matter under the authority of the Lord Jesus. We do not often consider that word, authority – but they understood it.

### What he asks

He will be specific in verse 3; but here he sets forth the general idea before mentioning the specific item.

- ✚ He asks them in accordance with the command (and example) they have already seen – so this is no new thing.
- ✚ Indeed, he asks them in accordance with the example they themselves have set for others.
- ✚ To do what? To walk (take action) in such a way as to please God. How could they possibly object to that?
- ✚ Indeed, he asks them for nothing new – just that they excel at what they are already doing (or, in our case, should be.)

Indeed, the entire matter is something he has taught them before; he is simply reminding them. What comes out most strongly is this: it is not an opinion, nor is it (as we would have it today) a case of “God knows best, even if you don't understand it.” It is the command of the Lord, given by the one who holds all authority in heaven and on earth.

Drum roll, please. Just what is he asking them to do?

## The Will of God

For this is the will of God, your sanctification; *that is*, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; *and* that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is *the* avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned *you*. For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. So, he who rejects *this* is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

(1Th 4:3-8 NASB)

He wants you to do what God wills. Which is, specifically?

✚ Your *sanctification*. It means being set apart, being holy, being pure. We want purity in our foods but not in ourselves; how could we possibly be holy and pure?

✚ By abstaining from sexual immorality. That's how.

Now the legal minded will begin to ask, "Just what do you mean, sexual immorality?" To put this in the masculine sense, it means any sexual behavior with someone other than your wife. Which, just to be specific, includes:

✚ Ordinary sex with any other woman. Yes, that includes someone who is not married to anyone. It includes the divorcee, the woman who's having trouble in her marriage, the one who asks you for it.

✚ Any form of homosexual behavior.

Yes, I know this is an unenlightened definition, as far as the world is concerned. But just by way of comparison, 1600 years ago, when Chrysostom preached on the subject in Constantinople, he had to spell it out to them too. We are so modern and up to date, aren't we?

### "Possess your vessel"

There is a peculiar choice of words in this passage. The phrase "possess your vessel" can have two different meanings, either of which would be allowed by the context:

✚ It could mean self-control of your own body. Paul would be saying, keep your own body pure; do not let it become impure by sexual contact outside of marriage.

✚ It could also mean taking care of your wife (the expression is a common one in Greek, I'm told). This may be a command to concentrate your sexual efforts on pleasing and caring for your wife.

It's just possible, of course, that Paul saw both possibilities – and deliberately intended them both. But in either translation, it means bodily purity – one man, one woman, for life. That's the personal side of it.

There is also a corporate, or body, side to it. We're fond of saying that it's OK as long as "no one gets hurt." But as you do this, is it really possible that no one gets hurt? Doesn't her husband, or his wife, suffer from this? Adultery changes the marriage relationship. It is the only sure ground of divorce in the church – and one reason for this is the pain it causes. Even in our day it is still referred to as "cheating." Paul calls it defrauding your brother; when you convince your brother in Christ of a lie so that you might take advantage of him, it is fraud. If you really think no one gets hurt, ask his permission first – and see if you see any signs of pain.

Finally, there is one last reason. This is one way the world should be able to tell who are the followers of God, and who are the followers of evil. While most of our society will consider any form of sex to be completely acceptable, you'll note please that they have their standards for "real Christians." One of them is marital faithfulness.

#### What's God going to do about it?

Of all the ideas that permeate the modern church, one of the most malicious is this: God is never seen as commanding anyone in the church – he's always pointing out how wise his path might be. So if we find his wisdom inconvenient (He just doesn't understand the circumstances) we fear no punishment.

Paul points out the danger of this particular delusion:

- ✚ We were called to be holy, pure and righteous – and not just when convenient.
- ✚ To reject this call is to reject the God who made that call upon us.
- ✚ This, indeed, is to quench the Holy Spirit – whose task it is to convict the world (including us) of sin and judgment to come.

OK, but does this mean that God would actually do something? Yes indeed. Having just pointed out to you that adultery defrauds your Christian brother, Paul now mentions one other detail: vengeance belongs to God. Let's suppose you are wonderfully successful in concealing your relationship from her husband. You have failed to deceive God; vengeance is his, and he will be both swift and sure about it.

Why don't we fear this? Because we love the God of good advice ("the Bible is your owner's manual") – and don't know the living God of vengeance and justice.

#### How then shall we live?

**Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for *anyone* to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.**

#### (1Th 4:9-12 NASB)

#### The love of the brethren

Paul does not ask us to stop one form of behavior as much as he does ask us to continue in another. How can you say that you love your Christian brother if you're having sex with his wife?

Having disposed of that point, Paul now moves on to the behavior which God wants: for us to love one another. Indeed, we are "taught by God" to love one another. How? It's his universe; do things right, and they work. These Christians already had such brotherly love for each other; they knew the results. Paul simply is telling that they should continue to excel in this department – always room for improvement.

### The Quiet Life

When we hear the word “ambition” we think immediately of some hard charging, no nonsense young executive type working his way up the corporate ladder. Paul gives us a different example here: we are to have as our ambition the quiet life. Permit me the three obvious points:

- ✚ First, we are to mind our own business. We can concern ourselves with others in their need – but not in our curiosity.
- ✚ Next, we are to work with our hands to obtain our material requirements. (What this says about our common desire for retirement could be an interesting discussion).
- ✚ We are to do these things because they are commanded from God.

### The view from the outside

One very good reason we are to behave in this way is simply this: The world sees the church (as portrayed in our totally unbiased press) as a collection of wild eyed weirdoes. The best counter to that is to show them Christians who are not seen as pious beggars, but as hard working, quiet citizens, ready to give in time of need.

### Is the Christian life a dull one?

It is the oldest lie in creation: virtue is dull and boring, evil is exciting and intellectually stimulating. Those who have chosen the ways of sin are quick to sneer at those living the dull, virtuous life. But may I offer you a more accurate comparison? In any third world country, you will see houses built out of whatever materials are available. Flattened gas cans, wood scraps, old car bumpers – to look at them they are much less interesting than a typical American suburban home. What dull construction techniques we have! How highly regulated our building contractors have become! Surely things would be more exciting if we adopted the “no standards required” method of house construction! Those houses are colorful; ours are dull and boring.

But ask the people who live in those houses: would they like to exchange lifestyles with someone who has a boring house? So why would you want to make such an exchange?

## The Resurrection of the Dead - 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

It seems that from the earliest days of the church there has been an ongoing fuss about the return of our Lord. No subject, it seems, is so readily argued over among the faithful. Regrettably, in our desire to know all, we seem very quick to exchange our theory (admirably complete, of course) for the deliberate work of the Spirit – who did NOT give us an entire theory. We are told that which we need to know for this life; that is excitement enough.

So let's hear what the Apostle Paul has to say to us:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of *the* day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

(1Th 4:13-5:11 NASB)

Why is Paul writing this?

If, as we have stated, there is too much speculation and theorizing about the return of our Lord, why did Paul write this? We see a few reasons here why we should know what we should know:

To clear out ignorance

One very good reason is this: there is a certain amount of information which is profitable to the church, concerning the Second Coming. In effect, Paul is saying that this is what you *should* know – that which is both necessary and sufficient, as they say in trigonometry. The matter is easily understood. It is unlikely that you, reading this, are a medical doctor. But likewise you are not completely ignorant of medicine. Your bathroom no doubt includes many medications, prescription and over the counter. Your knowledge is necessary and sufficient; if it becomes insufficient, you know where to ask.

### To still those inquiring after “times and seasons”

Paul would have had very little good to say about those who make their living writing books and hosting television shows which purport to tell us how prophecy is being fulfilled this very week. He treats those who inquire after “times and seasons” as those who are not only wasting their own time, but also their hearers. Indeed, the book of Revelation has not yet been given when this writing was done. Paul points out to them what he has told them before: the Day of the Lord will come like a thief. Our Lord tells us it is not for us to know when; rather, we should be ready for it at any time.

### To defeat the attack of the heretics

We might sometimes wonder why God tells us anything at all about the Second Coming. What purpose can it have in my daily life? One such purpose is this: to defeat those who attack the faith with their pet theories. Chrysostom reveals such a heresy from his own time; it will do as an example of what the human mind can conjure up:

- ✚ We all know that the root cause of death is sin in this world. You sin, you die.
- ✚ We also know that Christ was indeed sinless. Therefore, he could not possibly have died.
- ✚ If he did not die (space aliens can fake anything) then he could not possibly have been resurrected.
- ✚ And if there is no Resurrection for Christ, there is certainly no resurrection of the dead.

The answer to this is found (as always) in the Scriptures:<sup>1</sup>

**He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.**

### (2Co 5:21 NASB)

Defending the Resurrection of Christ defends our ultimate resurrection as well. Indeed, Paul makes that connection explicitly in First Corinthians, Fifteen. The argument is this: if Christ didn't rise from the dead, then nobody could. If the sinless, holy one of God couldn't do it, we can't either. But Christ is risen – and we shall rise too.

This, of course, is exciting news. It whets the appetite; what will that day be like? When will it get here? The latter, as we have seen, is not given to us to know – but we have some hints about the day itself.

### The Day of the Lord

So, then, just what will this day be like?

Let us begin with the obvious:

- ✚ The Lord descends. Just as the angels told the Apostles at his Ascension,<sup>2</sup> His landing will be a reversal of his takeoff. It is made plain that everyone will know it; therefore, if someone announces to you that He has come in secret, don't you believe it. Mark puts it this way:

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 53:6-12 is a more eloquent version

<sup>2</sup> Acts 1:9-12

"And then if anyone says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ'; or, 'Behold, *He is there*'; do not believe *him*; for false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order to lead astray, if possible, the elect. "But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance. "But in those days, after that tribulation, **THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL BE FALLING** from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. "Then they will see **THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS** with great power and glory. "And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of heaven.

(Mar 13:21-27 NASB)

- ✚ We shall hear the shout of the archangel. What does this mean? We don't know. This is the only place it is mentioned in Scripture. But anything an archangel shouts about is probably worth hearing.
- ✚ We shall hear the trumpet of God. Traditionally, these two saying have been combined to have the archangel Gabriel blowing his trumpet. There is no Scriptural support for this.  
But mankind has heard the trumpet of God before – at Mount Sinai.<sup>3</sup> Hinted at in a Psalm<sup>4</sup>, deeply foretold in Zechariah<sup>5</sup>, it is mentioned only here in the New Testament.

#### Order of events

It is a matter of great regret that much debate has happened over the number and sequence of resurrection events. Hal Lindsey, for example, lists no fewer than six resurrections (including that of Christ). We will make no pronouncement as to number and timing here; rather, we must gather the essential facts:

- ✚ The dead in Christ will rise first. "First", in this instance, is a comparison to those who are still alive. Unfortunately, this has also been interpreted as proof that there must be multiple resurrections of the dead. It does not say so; the comparison is between saints asleep in Christ and those awake.
- ✚ That all will rise (not necessarily at the same moment) is also prophesied; some to judgment, some to glory.<sup>6</sup>
- ✚ And, of significance to the living – we won't be forgotten. We will see the resurrection of the dead, and then rise to meet our Lord.

Now, it doesn't take much of a grasp of physics to understand that this will indeed be a miraculous event (duh.) So it is that some complain that it can't happen. But let me ask you this: which is harder, to raise the dead, or to create the universe from nothing? At least in the resurrection you still have all the required atomic parts.

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 19:17-20

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 47:5

<sup>5</sup> Zechariah 9:14

<sup>6</sup> Daniel 12:1-4

### But when?

It being a rather major event in world history, wouldn't it be nice if we could know just when it would be? Our Lord's answer (and Paul's, here) are short and to the point. You already know all you need to know about the timing.

- ✚ It will come "like a thief in the night." If we're all standing around on hilltops, wearing our white robes, we can count on it: he won't come that night. The only way to be ready then is to be ready now – and all the time.
- ✚ One sign is this: the world will be proclaiming "peace and safety." How will this happen? No details provided.
- ✚ Christ himself did not know, and explicitly told his disciples that they did not need to know.<sup>7</sup> If you're ready any time, it doesn't matter – now does it? If you're not ready at any time, then that's a problem you need to work on – because it is sin in your life.

### What to do while waiting

Did you ever notice that the Scriptures often contain a rather earthy sense of instruction? The glory of God rises above the skies, but it extends down to earth as well.

### Be sons of the light and day

A fine sounding phrase; how do we do it?

- ✚ First, by walking in the light – in other words, our deliberate imitation of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>
- ✚ Then, we should show the fruit of such light – the ordinary, day to day results of imitating Christ: goodness, righteousness, truth.<sup>9</sup>
- ✚ Finally, by living in fellowship not only with Christ, but with all his children as well.<sup>10</sup>

### Be sober – use the armor of God

Paul, in a passage which will be amplified in Ephesians, uses the metaphor of a soldier's armor.

- ✚ There is the breastplate of faith and love. The breastplate protects the heart of the soldier, and nothing so protects the heart of the Christian as faith. But faith alone would be brittle, so we must add love. Against this armor Satan has no weapon to bite.
- ✚ To this we add the helmet, the hope of salvation. The helmet covers the brain, the locus of thought. Despite the best efforts of generations of pulpit pounders, the word of the Lord still is meant to be taken both to heart and to head. Our intellectual acceptance of what Jesus says is rooted in salvation. If there is no salvation, why would anyone want to be good?
- ✚ We may combine these two readily in this: take the faith seriously. It is not just an emotional thrill on Sunday, but rather the full time love with our hearts, minds, souls and strengths.

### Encourage and build each other up

This is no light doctrine; each of us will see death many times before we experience it ourselves. How, then, can we build each other up?

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<sup>7</sup> Acts 1:7

<sup>8</sup> John 12:36

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 5:9

<sup>10</sup> 1 John 1:7

- ✦ We should do it in imitation of God – the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit is our comforter in time of distress, so we should take that same comfort and share it with others in need.<sup>11</sup>
- ✦ We should not engage in “worldly and empty chatter.” When we say something, it should be worth listening to.<sup>12</sup> Speculation about dates and times of our Lord’s return fall into this category.
- ✦ In contemplation of death men often find that their lives have been spent on the trivial and useless which are left behind at death. Let us pick up the attitude of those who are going to rejoice at our Lord’s coming – and therefore count the things of this world as loss.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

<sup>12</sup> 2 Timothy 2:15-19

<sup>13</sup> Philippians 3:8-11

## Harmony - 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Paul ends this letter with his care for the church. In particular, he reminds them of the harmony they must have – and tells them how to get it.

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people. Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. Brethren, pray for us. Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

(1Th 5:12-28 NASB)

### Spiritual Leaders

If there is dissension among the spiritual leaders of the church, the strain on the body of Christ is very great. History shows us that such dissension is not at all rare, unfortunately. The man in the pew often assumes that he can do nothing about this. However, Paul here gives us advice on the care and feeding of teachers and preachers.

If you think this unimportant, permit me to call to your mind a most unusual section of Scripture:

Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying: "**The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say *things* and do not do *them*.**"

(Mat 23:1-3 NASB)

Despite the fact that the scribes and Pharisees are clearly called hypocrites, Jesus tells us that we must obey them. Why? Because he knows that we will tend to join them in hypocrisy if we don't.

The steps for this are easy: suppose you think that I'm a hypocrite. Suppose that I, the hypocrite, tell you to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Do you then say, "Well, it sounds good, but he's a hypocrite – I don't have to do what he says." No, even though the hypocrite is giving it, you still recognize it as the word of God. Just because I'm a hypocrite doesn't mean that what I'm teaching is false. (Of course, it's a lot easier to get results as a teacher if you are not a hypocrite.)

Indeed, it is consistently taught that the Christian is to honor those in authority over them – whether civil or spiritual. As all authority is given to Christ, to honor those in authority *because He*

*commanded it* is to honor Him as well. It shows that you are willing and able to take upon yourself the discipline of being a Christian. How much more, then, should you honor and love those Christ has placed over you within his church?

Indeed, even if you suffer for it, you will be rewarded as you suffer for Christ's sake. Suffering in obedience to his commands summons up his strengthening in this life and reward in the life to come.

#### Why the teacher brings conflict

It is a very obvious fact: many whom we hire to serve us bring us pain and grief. You hire a dentist to work on your teeth; he causes you pain. You hire a doctor; he invades your body with a knife. Why, then, should the one whom God has called into service on your behalf be any less painful? Can one teach the Bible without causing people to think upon their sins and evil habits? Is such thought welcome – or do we let sleeping worms lie?

Now notice something, please. You pay the dentist quite well; mine makes a very fine living. The doctor also lives well. In this you show how much you value their work. Indeed, if you are long with them, you will come to think quite highly of them. How much more, then, should the shepherds of your soul be honored, thanked and loved?

One might object: I know how to reward the doctor and the dentist; how do I honor the teacher or pastor? "Esteem him highly in love," says Paul. A teacher's life is one which is often in conflict and weariness; love and encouragement go a long way.

#### Doorkeepers of heaven

Let me give you an example: suppose you receive a letter which announces to you that you (of all people) have been determined to be the rightful king of some country. You are told that you should come to the palace immediately and claim the crown (and all the money that goes with it). You immediately leave; upon arriving, you discover that the palace is indeed magnificent – and locked. Now of course, being the king, you don't carry the keys to the place with you; you're the king, right? And kings are far too dignified to bang on the door. But it's dark, and it's about to rain – and just as you begin to worry, some little guy comes along with the key to the door. He announces himself to be the royal doorkeeper, and opens the door for you. Perhaps it's a dull job, being the royal doorkeeper, but you have reason to thank him.

Your teachers and pastors are just that: we are privileged to be the doorkeepers of heaven. It is not given to us to keep anyone out, for our Lord has commanded that "whosoever will" should be admitted, and that all who are faithful will reign with Him. Surely, then, you can do as Paul asks, to appreciate and esteem them highly. With the conflict we get, we need it.

#### Harmony Between Believers

It is a truism of the church that we are to help the weak. Sometimes our vision of who are, indeed, "the weak" is a bit faulty. Paul calls out three such here, and tells us what help they need:

✚ We are to admonish the "unruly." The word in the Greek means those who are under authority – but not arranged right. It means those who are rebelling against the proper authority. We often see

such people as heroic sorts; in fact, they have failed to discipline themselves, It is no favor to them if we applaud them.

- ✚ We are to encourage the faint-hearted. Often we find those whose burdens seem great to them. As the Holy Spirit encourages and comforts us, we should do likewise with those who need it. We cannot repay God for his comfort; we can only pass it along.
- ✚ We are to help the weak. Those in illness, those who are powerless in prison (with or without bars), those whose faith is small – all these we are called to help.

#### Patience

Could I suggest, please, that your patience begin with your pastor?

Patience is much easier when the object is either loved or lovely. Patience with those who are obnoxious is much more difficult. Indeed, one suspects the Almighty of giving us a lout or two to deal with – so that we will learn patience with all.

Look at it this way: suppose you get a call from someone who wants to visit you at home. He asks directions. How much more detailed are your directions if you know that he is blind? If your patience increases with the physically blind, how much more should it increase for the spiritually blind?

#### Repay evil with good

As my wife will tell you, we all burn the French fries once in a while. It really helps if your husband treats those French fries not as a failure but as a burnt offering.

How do we overcome evil? As always, with good. The supreme example of this is Christ on the Cross. By his forgiveness there we have life. Only the God who is love could do that – and only by his power can we do likewise.

#### Personal Harmony

If your church leadership is sound, and the brothers love one another, there is yet one area to be brought into harmony. That's you, yourself. You must be in harmony with God.

#### Attitude

If you're one of those sour persimmons who feels really stuck on a planet full of sinners, you have a problem. Christ calls you not to gloom and doom but to a life of joy.

- ✚ He tells us to rejoice always. Why "always?" Because you are rejoicing in the Lord, and the Lord is eternal. All that is eternal is from God, who is good to his children.
- ✚ Next, we are commanded to pray without ceasing. The phrasing in the Greek might better be translated, "without omission." Meaning, of course, that we are to pray on all occasions. Bring everything to the Lord.
- ✚ Finally, we are to give thanks – whether or not we feel thankful. The Lord is gracious to us; all of eternity is ours with him. Our trials are small, our home to come is great – for this, give thanks.

#### Do not quench the Spirit

The word used here means to extinguish a flame. It's a perfect picture for someone of the time, for the flame (at Pentecost) and the oil that is consumed are pictures of the Holy Spirit – one is anointed with oil, the Spirit. The reader of this time would immediately picture an oil lamp:



To keep the light from going out, you would need to do three things:

- ✦ Be sure it gets enough air.
- ✦ Don't let the wind blow it out.
- ✦ Be sure you have plenty of oil.

The church of that time would have seen it the same way: the lamp cannot be kept in an airtight compartment, separate from the other portions of our lives. It must be with us if we are to see by it. But we must protect it from the winds of doctrine – every new theory and idea to come along. And without the oil of grace, the light will soon go out. The same oil that anoints the sick feeds the flame of the lamp.

#### Examine what is prophesied

If others have reason to admonish us, then surely we must pay attention. But not everything we hear comes from God; we must test it against the Scripture to see if it is sound. If it is good, we must hold to it. If it is evil, we must reject it, at whatever cost. If we do – we will indeed rejoice in the Day of the Lord, for we will have the victory with Him.

#### Purpose

We are not here to “be good for goodness’ sake.” There is a purpose in our doing good. The Day is coming; the Day of the Lord. Paul then, and your teachers now, want you to be ready for that day. How?

- ✦ You are to be sanctified (holy) in Christ. Recognize that by your own efforts you cannot make yourself holy and pure; only Christ can do that. But recognize also that you have your part to play.
- ✦ You are to be blameless. There are two ways to achieve this: either we give no injury to anyone, or we are forgiven. We should earnestly seek the first and graciously accept the second.
- ✦ We are to be complete – the love of Christ should guide our hearts, use our strength of body and be with our spirits. Thus all of each of us will be entirely his on that day. May the complete “us” be completed in Him.

## Second Thessalonians

### God Is Just - 2 Thessalonians 1

A question that puzzles the new Christian is this: If God is righteous (and omnipotent) then why is there such injustice in the world? In particular, why is there such injustice *towards Christians* in this world? As we shall see, there are answers to such questions – at least one of which is unknown to most Christians. In this letter, Paul corrects some misimpressions and also some of the heresy that came from the use of his first letter by those who thought themselves wise.

Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is *only* fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows *ever* greater; therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. *This is* a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. For after all it is *only* just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and *to give* relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed--for our testimony to you was believed. To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and *the* Lord Jesus Christ.

#### (2Th 1:1-12 NASB)

#### The Humility of Paul

One of the temptations to those educated in the Scripture is simply this: it's all too easy to set yourself up as an oracle. Just because you believe what God says does not mean that what you believe is what God says. The cure for this is to conduct oneself in humility – of which Paul gives us good example. He is not shy about correcting the various errors – but at all times he makes it clear that this is not his invention, but God's command.

#### Blessing

Note that in the introductory verses Paul pronounces a blessing upon them – but not from himself, but from God. The point may seem trivial; an example might clear things up.

My wife's father is a man rich in the things of this world. It is his good pleasure to give what he calls "full ride" scholarships – as long as the recipient stays in school and maintains good grades, all expenses will be covered. It happened once that one of the high school students in our church was selected (by his high school) for such a scholarship. His mother, believing that no doubt we had pulled strings to make this happen for a friend, thanked us effusively. We had to make it plain that, though my

wife was his daughter, we had no influence on the decision. Indeed, the first we heard of it was from the family; we had no involvement at all. It is a great privilege to be one who is so close to God as an apostle must be; it is not great power. Power is accompanied by authority in the kingdom of God; authority is accompanied by responsibility. No more, no less.

### Thanksgiving

Did you notice that Paul gives thanks to God for the Thessalonians? He even goes so far as to say that this is fitting to do; in other words, he thanks God for the blessing they are to him! He is the one who brought them to Christ; he thanks God for them.

I suspect this is something like having grandchildren. Those blessed with such (at this writing we are not) take joy in watching the little ones grow. Paul is joyous over two things:

- ✚ First, that their faith is growing. They are becoming more solidly grounded in the faith; this is key.
- ✚ They show that growth in faith by their actions – as they love one another. This is the visible key to faith.

### Speaking proudly

Indeed, Paul is only human in this. Like grandchildren, his disciples are the best, so he brags about them. In mind's eye, see him pulling out his collection of pictures. We do the same thing; how do we react when someone tells us of the courage of the Chinese house churches? We may blush to think of how little we suffer for the cause; but we are proud indeed of their faith.

Faith and perseverance are the pictures Paul produces. Faith, because we are saved by faith. Perseverance, so that we show ourselves to be the seed that fell among good soil. In the midst of affliction and persecution we are to be a light to the world. What joy it brings to see that light shine!

### Discouragement

These Christians, like us today, went through times of discouragement. The world seems so unfair to us. Let's examine that thought a little more closely.

### Our expectations

One reason discouragement sets in is simply this: Our expectations don't match the reality we find. What expectations?

- ✚ We're the good guys – so why doesn't the rest of the world love us? Why do they continually sneer at us, inventing slander?
- ✚ Just tell me – what is it that I have done wrong? You keep talking about the Salem witch trials as if I were there. Specifics, please.
- ✚ Why is it that I am so often falsely accused – especially when learning the truth is so simple and easy?

We expect that the world should be composed of righteous people, condemning us in our lawlessness – not just for our existence. We expect the world to seek out the truth; we did. But the world is none of these things. We are not to judge them<sup>14</sup>; simply to speak the truth in love.

#### Plain indication

Paul makes an interesting argument here about the wickedness of the world and God's justice. He recognizes all that we have to say about injustice as being fact. Indeed, Paul now tells us that this points out the justice of God. If they would persecute and afflict us good guys, then what have they deserved? In their actions God is showing us what they think of Him. (The servant is not above the master). Therefore, says Paul, they are going to get what they deserve – in God's good time.

Let sin abound – for now. We are concerned for eternity. He promises us that justice will be eternal, for He is just. At His return, we shall see justice for those who defied God. When He returns, he will deliver it.

In the meanwhile, what about us?

- ✚ We are to be worthy of the kingdom, accepting persecution and affliction as if they were merit badges to earn.
- ✚ We do this by sharing the suffering of Christ. Contemplate his wounds, taken for us! If we share the suffering, we shall share the glory.

#### The justice of God

Do you see the sense of it? You complain of what the world does to us; is this not then the justification of God's wrath? Because it is a plain indication, they are convicted by their own actions.

Paul next includes two groups of people in this wrath: those who do not know God, and those who do not obey the Gospel. The latter we understand; if you've been given the glorious message of Christ and choose to have it make no difference you should get what a hypocrite deserves. The former causes more trouble.

Why, we might ask, will God punish them who do not know Him? If you know and don't obey, that's one thing. But suppose you don't know?

The answer is found in the original language. The word translated "know" means "to listen attentively." In the Greek, it is used in situations where a servant must listen attentively to know what his master wants. In short, these are the people who choose to "sit on the fence." They are not those who listen and rebel; they are those who won't listen. "How could God condemn me for sitting on the fence?" The answer is in the question; you knew God was speaking to you, and you didn't want to listen.

Interestingly, Paul says nothing about those afflicting us – rather, the key is in the relationship with God. Vengeance belongs to God; but we are the ambassadors of reconciliation.

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:12

### The Coming Glory

There is a curious phrasing here, that Christ will be glorified *in* his saints at his return. We learn from this that Christ is the example for Paul in this. Paul took pride in these saints whom he had brought to salvation; how much more, then, will Christ glory in his saints? He will be revealed from heaven (note: revealed, not come). His saints will come with him; the angels will accompany him, and all of us who are saved will look at him and marvel at him. The day is so awesome and so different that we have but tiny glimpses of it in the Bible – and those glimpses show a dazzling change – and a Day of Wrath.

### The Day of Wrath

Perhaps no subject in the Bible is as vigorously argued as the Second Coming. It is sufficient for us to point out two facts concerning his return:

- ✚ Those who are afflicting his children will themselves be grievously afflicted.
- ✚ Those who are afflicted will see his sweet relief.

This smacks of hellfire and brimstone, doesn't it? We often neglect the profit of fear. We put warning lights and gates at railroad crossings; people drive around them and are killed by (what else?) a train. Fear is neither pleasant nor convenient – but it serves a purpose. Fear God, dread naught.

### In the meanwhile...

While we're waiting for all this to happen (and Paul has much more to say about that in chapter 2) what should we do? Paul gives us an example:

- ✚ Pray for each other, that we will be counted as worthy of the kingdom.
- ✚ Pray that God will grant us power to fulfill every good purpose in our hearts.
- ✚ Pray that God will grant every good thing we come to desire.
- ✚ Pray that God grant us power to accompany our faith.

We are not so much to pray for relief from affliction, nor even triumph over it – but rather that we will do the work we are commissioned to do in all goodness, faith and power. If we do, then our acts will be for the glory of God – and all will be in accord with the grace of God, by which we have salvation.

## The Man of Sin - 2 Thessalonians 2

A significant portion of the modern evangelical Christian's doctrine has been invented in the last two hundred years. One of the distinguishing points of that viewpoint is its view of Revelation. Until John Darby's time, the interpretation of this passage, though disputed (see Chrysostom below), was generally quite different than it is today. These differences will be pointed out as they occur. But first, the Scripture.

### Signs Repeated

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for *it will not come* unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?

### (2Th 2:1-5 NASB)

#### Problem: false teaching

It comes as a surprise to most Christians to learn that the Scripture clearly teaches that false teachers and false prophets will arise. Indeed, we see here that it happens as early in the church as when the Apostles themselves yet lived. In this instance it appears that someone is teaching that the Day of the Lord has already happened – something which will have enormous consequences when it does arrive, and very troubling to think that you have missed it.

Paul reaffirms that the Day of the Lord – his return – is indeed a sound belief. It will come, and when it does the Christians will rise from the dead to meet their Lord. Evidently someone had a fake letter from Paul (this stuff still happens today, folks) to which someone added his own revelation. Paul makes it clear that the doctrine given should not change.

But note the way he phrases it: “Let no one ... deceive you.” You cannot cheat an honest man, said St. Barnum. We let people deceive us – often because we are too lazy to search the Scriptures ourselves. We shall see how this comes.

#### Step 1 – the Apostasy

Apostasy means an abandonment, a desertion, a departure from the faith. We need to realize that apostasy is real, disguised (wolves in sheep's clothing) and a great reason to study the Scriptures ourselves. But notice that it precedes the revelation of the man of sin. In short, the system of apostasy comes first, then the Man of Sin (usually identified as the Antichrist, and often as “the beast”).

That's the first thing. But see this: this apostasy does not go off and found its own new religion. No; this apostasy takes place within the church itself, in the Temple of God.

You think not? Hear what Paul had to say about it in another area:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

(2Ti 4:3-4 NASB)

Folks, many will welcome this. By some accounts, many already have.

Step 2 – the Man of Sin

Also translated the “Man of Lawlessness”, this implies that the Man of Sin will be in our midst and then be revealed – God will make it plain who he is. The Scripture also calls him the Son of Destruction; in the original, “destruction” is also used to describe Satan as he is bound in the Abyss. The phrase means one who had a purpose, for which he is now not suited. Satan was a cherubim of light; he can no longer serve that purpose. So it will be with this man.

How are we to know this man when we see him?

- ✦ He will oppose all other “gods” and things worthy of worship. In other words, he will claim that his system is the only one true system – all others must be false and leading to hell.
- ✦ He will exalt himself over all others in the world. He will claim complete supremacy.
- ✦ He will seat himself in the very throne of God – the word used here for “seat” comes from the same Greek word which is the source of our word, “cathedral.” He sits; therefore he is the highest. He will assert his supremacy over all men.
- ✦ He will “display himself” (the phrase could be translated “show off”) as if he were God.

You would think such a man would be unmistakable. But because this man will be seen as in the church, it will take diligence to discern him. However, we have a few clues.

The Man of Sin

And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains *will do so* until he is taken out of the way. Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; *that is*, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

(2Th 2:6-12 NASB)

Restraint

For the first 1800 years of the church, there was some argument – but little doubt – over the central mystery of this passage. Just what does Paul mean by “what restrains him now”? With the rise of premillennialism, however, the matter is now disputed. We shall take the modern view first.

The modern view is that the restraint is the Holy Spirit. Since we know that we are raptured at verse 1, chapter 4 of Revelation, the revealing of the man of sin (the beast, generally) comes after the church is gone from the earth. No church, no temple of the Holy Spirit.

The ancient Christians rejected this view directly; nothing could remove the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit is from God. Rather, they said, it could be the *grace* (charisma) of the Spirit that is removed. The word for grace is also the word for gifts, so this would imply only the miraculous gifts would be removed.

The ancient church rejected this. Their argument was simply this: if Paul meant the Holy Spirit, he would have said so. There was no reason for him not to have said so – but excellent reason for him to be so mysterious about the other option.

That option is that the restraint is none other than the Roman Empire. From the pragmatic Chrysostom to the philosophical Augustine, the early church interpreted this to mean that the Roman Empire had to fall before the man of sin would be revealed. Their reasoning was simple: God had appointed the Roman Empire to be the birthplace of Christianity. Its laws and form were conducive to the spread of the Gospel. Its rulers were seen as magistrates wielding the sword of God. Its demise would be seen as a shattering blow against civilization – and the spread of the Gospel.

As we shall see, this dovetails very nicely with the Reformation view that the man of sin is none other than the Pope. There are various theories on this, especially depending upon your view of the date of the fall. The western empire fell in 473, if memory serves correctly. The last vestige of the entire empire was Constantinople, which fell in 1453. The first coincides nicely with the coming of the papacy; the second with the Reformation.

#### Step by Step

We see here what will happen concerning the Man of Sin:

- ✚ He will be *revealed* when the restraint is removed. If this is the papacy, its great rise to power happened after the fall of the Roman Empire – but its forms were clearly visible before that. In retrospect we could see this, but at the time no one seemed to – until the fall of Rome, when the church took on much of the power and authority of the old Roman Empire.
- ✚ He will be slain – by the breath (the word can also be translated spirit) of Christ's mouth. Reformation scholars took this to mean that the Bible – containing the words of Christ's mouth, his "breath" in either sense – slays the papacy by showing the world what the pope really is.
- ✚ But his ultimate demise (his end) comes only at the appearance of Christ – and please note, this has not yet happened.

#### In the meanwhile, signs and wonders

There is a disturbing point here. So many of us have been through the thought that, "If only I could see one genuine miracle, my faith would be so strong." No, your faith would cease to be faith, it would be sight. And Satan knows this as well. So he produces the counterfeit miracles in his own style – they look good, but lead away from Christ.

You might ask how this could be. We are told that God will send them a delusion – which will separate the true Christians from the false. Those who really love evil will see in this delusion the easy way to heaven. Those who really love Christ will see it as it is: fraud. God provides this delusion to separate the sheep from the goats.

### Resistance

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word *of mouth* or by letter from us. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word.

### (2Th 2:13-17 NASB)

So what are we going to do about this? Let's start by remembering who we are:

- ✚ We are the chosen of God. He picked us; we didn't pick ourselves. Therefore, we are those who are loved by God, just as an adopted baby would be loved.
- ✚ We are those who are chosen for salvation.
- ✚ How? By sanctification of the Spirit, not our own works.
- ✚ How? By faith in the truth – our trust in His words.
- ✚ How? By the preaching of the gospel.

This, then, is what apostasy throws away. See the stakes in this deception.

Remember our purpose: we are to be like Him. In this life, the imitation of Christ. In the life to come, joint heirs of the kingdom. We are like him now; we shall be like him then.

So – what are we supposed to do?

- ✚ Stand firm. Don't run from speaker to speaker, seeking the brilliant one who will explain all. Rather, search the Scriptures diligently, for in them you find life.
- ✚ Hold to the traditions of the faith. The faith of your fathers is strong; it is even stronger when you make it your own.
- ✚ In all trial, pray for comfort, hope and strength.

Tradition? It is the vote of those Christians who don't happen to be walking the planet. It is a tower of strength when fortified with the Word of God.

## Lifestyle: Christian - 2 Thessalonians 3

One hears a great deal today about “lifestyle evangelism.” The concept is sometimes misused to mean, “I’ll be a nice person and everything will be OK.” This is simply not true; and when it is shown to be false we are often very disappointed. Paul here lays out the true principles of lifestyle evangelism. It’s harder than it appears; perhaps that’s why it is so seldom tried.

### Objectives

First, let’s see what we are aiming for.

Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as *it did* also with you; and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil *one*. We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will *continue to do* what we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

### (2Th 3:1-5 NASB)

Let’s begin by examining the objectives the Apostle lays out:

- ✚ First, that the Gospel will spread rapidly. This is supreme for the Apostle Paul. He is therefore willing to do anything needed to further this goal. That is his mission (and ours).
- ✚ Along with this he wants the Gospel to be glorified. If you cannot convert, you can at least break up the soil to make it fertile ground. If all think well of the Gospel, growth is much easier.
- ✚ Finally, that he and his companions will be rescued from others. Note that he does not ask to have no trouble. He knows he will have trouble. He asks to be delivered in it.

We can also see how he expects this to be accomplished.

### The Lord is faithful

At a point where a modern Christian would begin to lay out plans, fundraising drives, missionary campaigns and such Paul tells us his method: the Lord is faithful. It is the secret of his success; he knows his source. He is not shy about saying so, either. He proclaims the Lord faithful at a point where we would talk about our budget. It brings up the question: do we *know* the Lord is faithful? Do we count on it? And if we do, then surely we will praise Him for it.

There is a curious thought here. Just how does the Lord show his faithfulness to us? What’s his method?

- ✚ He strengthens us – largely by trial.
- ✚ He delivers us – from trial.

It appears inconsistent; it also has that certain “nick of time” air about it. It is not inconsistent. It would be so if *we* were the ones being glorified. We aren’t; he is. He is foiling the work of Satan through us. Seen through the world’s eyes, it is inconsistent. Knowing the purpose of God, it is perfectly consistent.

### Through the church

Such thoughts might dismay his readers; so Paul is gentle with them. He tells them he has confidence in them because of their relationship to the Lord. And what is that relationship? It is one of obedience. The result of that obedient life is two fold:

- ✚ First, it produces good work which is all done in love.
- ✚ Second, that good work is consistent, for experienced Christians are steadfast.

We see an example here of the ordinary Christian in obedience to God – producing the fruit of the Spirit.

### Example

If you're going to preach this doctrine, you will quickly be asked to show that you have lived it yourself:

**Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we *kept* working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right *to this*, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example.**

(2Th 3:6-9 NASB)

### Tradition

It is traditional in American evangelical churches to announce that we follow no tradition, only the Scripture. Indeed, we are very proud of our rejection of tradition. The word used here is the same word Christ uses when he condemned the Pharisees for following the traditions of men rather than God. But did you catch that word, "Proud?" That's the difficulty. By and large, we don't reject tradition because it's bad; we reject it because we are proud. It is just possible your mother was right, you know.

We are so sure that freedom in Christ means "no rules" that we tell ourselves that there are no rules. But see here what the Apostle teaches: no rules means an unruly, undisciplined life. We hate the word "discipline" too. But there it is. Consider it in the context of the phrase, "disciplined athlete."

The truth is simple: rebellion, in most circumstances, is a sin. It is not the virtue we paint it to be. Teenage rebellion is not good; mid-life crisis rebellion isn't either.

Indeed, Paul is careful to point out not that he is rebellious and rejects all the rules – but that he *exceeds* the rules. It is clear from the Scripture that those who devote their full time efforts to the church are, in general, to be supported by the church. This is something acknowledged not only in the church, but outside. Any atheist would acknowledge that our pastor is our employee, and therefore entitled to his wages. Consider, then, the effect of exceeding the rules. Paul's entitled; but he supports himself so that he would not be a burden (and all that this would imply). He does so deliberately, so as to be a model for them. The method is still used by missionaries today.

A model of...

What kind of model?

- ✚ First, he is the model of a disciplined life. You can look at him and see the virtue in his life. We don't hear much about virtue anymore.
- ✚ He is also a model of endurance. He endures labor and hardship; these speak convincingly to his hearers.

His purpose is to spread the Gospel. His method is to be the example of what he wants us to become.

Instruction

To this end, then, Paul gives his instruction:

**For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good. If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. *Yet* do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all! I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.**

(2Th 3:10-18 NASB)

The Busybody

"She lives for others – you can always tell the 'others' by their hunted look." The people in Paul's day had no thought of retirement; even if you were rich, you had to look after the money. Idle days were, for most, rare. But it was always possible that if you were old enough (especially for widows) that the church might be persuaded to feed you. So how do you tell the difference between the idle busybody and the senior saint? Elsewhere Paul goes into more detail, but the principles he lays out here are sufficient:

- ✚ First, the busybody leads the undisciplined life. If you are too busy to pray, too busy to study the Scriptures and too busy to spend time in sweet communion with your Lord, something is definitely wrong. The charitable life is also the disciplined life.
- ✚ This is most commonly seen by the symptom of doing no work. With rare exceptions, there is always something we can do to help. Even if it means knitting slippers while you rest in your wheelchair. (The point is not how productive your labors are; it is the elimination of idle hands, the devil's workshop.)
- ✚ How to recognize a busybody? If you've never seen one in action, then God has blessed you. If you have, I need explain no further.

What to do about it

First things first: don't grow weary of doing good. Dealing with the idle takes tact and patience. Here's Paul's simplified method:

- ✚ Take note of the person – and don't associate with him. Let the shame of idleness be pronounced; if the conscience is not dead, things will change. But do not do this in an angry, mean spirit; rather, do it in love. Our society exalts leisure; sometimes we see leisure as life. Bring the idler around gently.
- ✚ Do not hesitate to admonish; it must be done. One of the perils of the idle busybody is that he thinks he's exhibiting Christian charity – he's going around identifying everyone's faults, for example. There are some things in which the mirror lies.

#### Farewell

Paul's farewell is somewhat unusual, until you remember that this letter is a response to a fraudulent one from an imposter. Look for the signature, he tells them. But there is one point here for our learning, too. He ends this letter as he began it: with grace and peace from Christ. It is the goal of the ordinary Christian: live a productive life, full of grace and peace, at the end of which your Lord will welcome you home from your pilgrimage.