

STUDY 4 - 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-18

As Paul begins to conclude this letter, he writes a very practical section dealing with some patterns of sinful behaviour that were beginning to emerge in some sections of the Thessalonian church. This final section is not unconnected to what has gone before it though – all the way through this letter Paul has been praying that this church will grow in faithful deeds (see 1:11 and 2:17) and love to God and others (1:3). The fact that some people are not working hard in the tasks God has given them are not just evidences of laziness, they show that some people are not growing as Christians.

Do Not Associate With Those Who Won't Work (3:6, 14-15)

As you read through this final section it is clear there is one basic command. The church are to “keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us”. The fact that this is happening amongst those who call themselves believers and are part of the church is emphasised. In verse 6 the people referred to are “every brother”, and in verse 15 they are told to “warn him as a brother” rather than thinking it is evidence that they are outside the church. Verse 14 fills in what “keep away” means – it is not to “associate with him”, it is to “warn him”.

Obviously the issue here is those who are able to work but won't. This is not referring to those who can and are willing but have no paid work (due to unemployment) and it is not referring to those who are unable to work due to illness, disability or age.

The purpose of this is to win the brother back, that “he may feel ashamed” and turn from his sin. It is a requirement for church discipline, as this idleness is in disobedience to God, harms the church (as they are called on to provide for their needs – that's probably implied in verse 12 “settle down and earn the bread they eat” rather than begging for it or being given it). This sin is a persistent sin and it is a public sin (it's the kind of sin everyone knows about) so must be dealt with.

For this command to be obeyed in the life of the church we must all have two convictions. The first is that not obeying God is a serious thing, and the

secondly we must all love those who persistently refuse to obey God enough so we are willing to do something about it.

Imitate Paul's Work (3:7-10)

As Paul command the church to deal with the idle he reiterates his teaching on work, the teaching he had shown the Thessalonians by the way he lived when he was with them. As he says, he did have a right to be paid for his work (verse 9 – see 1 Timothy 5:17-18), but he refused to take it so he may be a model to these new believers. He was not idle, paying for the food he ate with the money he earned through hard manual labour (notice the strength of the words he uses in verse 8 “labouring” and “toiling”). The principle Paul taught while he was in Thessalonica is spelt out in verse 10 “If a man will not work, he shall not eat”.

There is an even greater principle that seems to lie behind Paul's teaching and practice here, and it's the principle of “what will bring the most glory to God? What will further the cause of the gospel?”. Paul had obviously decided that working while he preached and planted churches would do that, as it gave him an opportunity to teach in the way he lived amongst those he preached to. The idle in Thessalonica had no regard for God's glory or the cause of the gospel, and by their public sin were harming both.

Do Your Own Work (3: 11-13)

Paul's attention turns directly to the idle in Thessalonica, whose lives were in stark contrast to the apostles. The English translations of verse 11 use a pun – they are not busy with work, they are busy bodies using their time to interfere with others lives. However D A Carson has pointed out that's not quite what the original means – the word apparently does not have an English equivalent, it's more like the idle are in the pockets of the rich in the church and so are now loyal to them, which is causing problems.

As we think through these verses in our own situation we need to hear that they teach a very positive view of work. Even if you do not enjoy your job, even if it is unsatisfying and difficult, the fact that you have one and that you are day by day earning money to provide for yourself and your family is a good thing.

Going to work every morning is an obedient act to our Lord – it is part of our “spiritual act of worship”, and it is part of the “good deeds” we have been called to in Christ Jesus.

Rest In God’s Work (3: 16-18)

As Paul concludes the letter he does so by assuring this suffering church of the peace and grace they have – both of which come from God’s work for them, so are guaranteed. They and we can stake our lives on them!

Jesus himself is described as “the Lord of peace”. Verse 16 is striking as peace is exactly what this church does not seem like it has. The world is at war with it as it is persecuting these believers. But Jesus gives peace – first of all with God (what we already have), then peace in our consciences as we take hold of the fact that our sins are forgiven, then peace with each other in the church, then a knowledge that there is a great peace coming in the future. These words are like a message coming from politicians about a peace treaty that has just been signed, delivered to troops on the ground that are still in the thick of the battle. All of this does produce a deep, felt feeling of peace – and this is part of the prayer, but it’s a “feeling” rooted in the gospel.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Look at 1:11-12, and 2:16-17 again. In the light of those prayers, why is idleness such a big issue?

What is the main command in these verses – look particularly at 3:6-7 and 14-15?

Who are these verses talking about?

What are they doing?

Why is it so serious?

What should the church do about it and why?

How had Paul taught them about this when he was with them (verses 7-10)?

Why did Paul not take payment for his work preaching the gospel, even though he had the right to? What do we learn from this about his motivation behind all he does? How is this motivation lacking in those who are idle?

What does this section teach us about the goodness and value of work, in God's sight?

Why is verse 16 an appropriate request, considering the situation of the church Paul was first writing to?

What exactly is Paul praying for? Is it simply a "nice feeling"?