

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

Introduction

This passage is very similar to part of the previous epistle, 1 Thessalonians 4, but here Paul is more severe in tone, probably because the situation was getting worse. There were two basic problems among the Christians at Thessalonica – their disorderly walk, and their idleness.

A disorderly walk

Some were walking in a disorderly way (AV). The metaphor used is a military one, *ατακτως*. The underlying idea is that every man has a post in life and in the church, and therefore he ought never to be away from his post, but always at it. Paul is speaking of those who were not at their posts, not keeping ranks, not doing their duty.

We are all part of a whole, and members of a body, with functions which can be discharged by no other. Therefore we do not act independently. We need to realize our place in the work of the whole, and be dependable and reliable in our service for others. There is no place for unreliability, resignation at the least little upset, or an unsettled and restless attitude. Sadly these things are found in many a Christian worker, Sunday School teacher, theological student, or man in the ministry. Paul emphasises that steadfastness in duty is one of the elementary requirements of Christian discipleship. Loyalty and constancy leads to real service to others and growth in character.

Idleness

But besides these people, there were those who were completely idle, who did not work at all. There was idleness in the church. They were eating bread for which they had not worked. Their excuse was their excitement in awaiting the Second Coming.

Paul had been very careful to set a good example in this. If anyone had an excuse to refuse to work because of the load of his spiritual work, Paul had. He could have filled every hour of the day with church work, and therefore deserved to be supported financially by those whom he served. He taught the Corinthians: **The Lord has commanded that those who preach the Gospel should receive their living from the Gospel** (1 Corinthians 9:14). So Paul himself was entitled to maintenance, but he did not exercise his right to it. **We worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you** (2 Thessalonians 3:8).

Paul was a tent maker. Every Rabbi had to learn a trade. He got no pay for his teaching. Some were bakers, barbers, carpenters, or masons. Christ Himself had a trade. It is a good thing for every man to have a trade even if he is in the ministry. It enlarges his usefulness and acceptance. So Paul as a Rabbi had a trade and still used it so as he wasn't a burden to the church.

Yet in spite of this example, some Christians were idle and lazy. Therefore Paul speaks out and has a right to do so. His rule was **If a man will not work, he shall not eat** (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Work is essential to Christian character. We all talk as if work is a burden, and we live for the weekends and holidays. We would like to be left a fortune so we could give up work. But work is a great blessing. To be workless is a tragic situation. The cost of unemployment in our country is not just lack of money in pockets, but early deaths, physical and mental illness, marriage breakdown, child neglect and cruelty, life lived under constant tension, hopelessness and despair.

Paul also speaks of the moral dangers. Idleness multiplies temptations and opportunities for sin. "The Devil finds work for idle hands to do." Busybodies meddle in other people's affairs and interfere with what is not their business. Gossiping becomes a problem. Hence Paul comes down so firmly on those who are idle.

Settle down and earn the bread they eat (2 Thessalonians 3:12). Men should work with quietness and eat their own bread. They should not be idlers and spongers. So let us see work in the true perspective. It is good, honourable and beneficial. Not just to line our pockets, but for the sake of our character which is enriched by it. We should be grateful for it and do our best in it.

There was once a man who bought a house without even seeing the house. He was asked why he took such a big risk. He answered, "I know the man who built that house, and he builds his Christianity in with the bricks".

Dealing with idlers

Now Paul also speaks of dealing with idlers. **Keep away from every brother who is idle. Take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed** (2 Thessalonians 3:6,14). The Christian community has a character to keep. That character is compromised by misconduct of members, and therefore we cannot be indifferent to it. If the church is to keep its testimony, it must act when a member visibly departs from its standards. A bad man may be at home in the world, but ought never to feel at home in the church. Therefore he is to be excluded from fellowship so that he realizes his error and is ashamed.

He is also to be admonished. Admonition is a duty, but a most difficult one. It is an unpleasant job, which falls to the leaders of the church. Often people criticize the admonisher, and it is easy to criticize, but often they do not realize how much the leader shrinks from the task and is driven only by sheer duty and the importance of keeping a clear conscience.

The reaction of the person being admonished is one worry, but another very real problem for the leader is the awareness of his own failures and weak character. The leader fears the charge of being a hypocrite and a Pharisee. When the task of admonition has to be done, a man cannot do it unless he does it humbly, confessing his own failures, having put things right himself. He must not admonish in a judgemental way but appealing to the erring one to consider their ways in the light of the Word of God. Plead the cause of God with those who are erring.

Must also stress love here. Remember that the erring one is also a brother, and not an enemy. The aim is to reclaim and restore, not to destroy. The Christian is one for whom Christ died, and is therefore very valuable to the Lord. Discipline is meant to be for edification, not for destruction, for building up Christian character and not pulling it down. We must act towards sinners as Christ did. He never extenuated sin or compromised with it, yet He also showed the door of hope and mercy to the sinner.

Conclusion

So here as elsewhere, it all goes back to Christ. He is the pattern for our hard work and industry. He was a workman, and a good one at that (Legend has it that he made the best of yokes in all Palestine, and men came from all over the country to buy his yokes.) He is also the pattern for discipline. No one is at ease with sin in the presence of Christ. Yet no one is excluded from His mercy. He is the sinner's friend.

We all start like Peter with "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man", and end like Peter with "Lord, to whom shall we turn but You. You have the words of eternal life."