

## 2 Thessalonians 3. 6-18. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 8 July 2012.

As most, if not all, of you know, this is the last of our studies in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. And our Bible reading for this morning commences at verse 6 of chapter 3.

*Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you draw back from every brother who is walking disorderly, and not according to the tradition that you received from us.*

*For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we did not walk disorderly when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying, but with labour and toil we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have the right, but to give ourselves as an example to you that you might imitate us.*

*For even when we were with you, we gave you this command, that if anyone is not willing to work, neither let him eat.*

*For we hear that some are walking among you disorderly, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now such we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ that working quietly they eat their own bread.*

*But you, brothers, do not lose heart in doing good.*

*If anyone does not obey our word in this letter, take note of that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.*

*And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*

*Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.*

*The greeting of me Paul with my own hand, which is the mark (of genuineness) in every letter; so I write.*

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.*

As you will have noted, the main subject of our passage is that of some who were walking 'disorderly' in that they were not willing to work, and who, as a consequence, were both imposing on other believers and were meddling in their affairs.

Before we look at any detail, I want to make two points by way of introduction.

First, that this was a subject about which the apostle felt very strongly ... very strongly indeed.

I say this, partly because this is not the first time he has drawn it to the attention of the saints. In his earlier letter to them, he had not only urged the church, and its leaders in particular, to 'admonish the disorderly',<sup>1</sup> but had urged all the believers – and I quote – 'to strive earnestly to be quiet, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands' ... at which point he reminded them that he had previously 'commanded' them (presumably, orally when he was with them) to do just this – and had done so having in mind their testimony to 'those outside'.<sup>2</sup> So this was no new topic. From the first, Paul had clearly detected a tendency on the part of some of the converts at Thessalonica towards indolence.

A second indication of Paul's strength of feeling on this particular issue comes in the amount of space which he devotes to it. Leaving aside the earlier references – both oral and written – he now devotes no less than (what we have as) ten verses of his final chapter to the subject.

And we can hardly miss the intensity of his feelings about such disorderly behaviour when we note the *extremely* strong language which he uses ... first, in addressing those who were following his own example of walking orderly and of working hard, and, second, in addressing those who were not. To the first, he says, 'Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ', and, to the second, he says, 'we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ'. I know of no stronger language that he could have used.

Oh no, there can be no question, the apostle felt very keenly about this matter.

The second point I want to make by way of introduction is that, contrary to the views of many, I can see no reason whatever to associate the misbehaviour of those who were walking disorderly with any prophetic views which they may – or may not – have entertained. That is, I fail to find any suggestion in anything the apostle wrote to suggest

that the men in question were motivated *either* by the expectation that our Lord was going to return in the very near future, *or* by the false idea that the day of the Lord had already come.

And, frankly, I have great problems with the theory that these men had given up their earthly toil and had been living lives of ease *because* they had convinced themselves that the Lord Jesus was going to come in the very near future, and that there was therefore no reason for them to continue working with their hands.

Firstly, I fail to see so much as one hint anywhere in the passage that either they or the apostle Paul made such a connection. And, whereas the first section of the previous chapter was certainly concerned with future events and with the return of our Lord Jesus, *that* section is divorced from our passage by no less than ten verses which, as we have seen over the past two weeks, have ranged over many other – and unconnected – subjects.

Not only so, but, as we have seen, Paul had clearly detected this tendency of some to idleness *even before* he wrote his *first* letter to the church. So that there is no way that any recently received bogus letter *could* have played any part in this.

But, far more important, the whole thrust of New Testament teaching concerning our Lord's promised coming goes in exactly the opposite direction. For our belief that He might return at any moment has the most profound and sanctifying effects on the way we live. For example, the apostle John taught plainly that our expectation that the Saviour is to be revealed, and that we shall then both see Him and be like Him ... that this expectation drives us (inescapably) to purify ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

As the apostle Peter saw clearly, the effect upon the person who knows that, when 'the day of the Lord' *will* come, everything down here is to be burned up in the fire of God's judgement *is not* to pack in his job and to stop working but to live a life of holiness and godliness.<sup>4</sup>

And I have my Lord's *own* word for the fact that it is *not* those who *look* for the coming of their lord who misbehave ... but those who *do not*.<sup>5</sup>

From the time of their conversion, the Thessalonian believers had been waiting with expectancy for God's Son, our Lord Jesus, to come from heaven,<sup>6</sup> and I note that Paul linked together their faith-driven *work* and their loving *labour* with their steadfast *hope*. No, there was certainly no contradiction between a lively expectation that the Lord could return at any moment and a godly and industrious life lived for God's glory ... indeed, the very opposite.<sup>as</sup>

But, if the disorderly and idle conduct of some was *not* due to either such an expectation or to any wrong ideas on prophetic matters, how are we to explain it?

Well, apart from the fact that this was still a very young church, and that in most communities there will be found those who have an aversion to any form of hard work, we do know that there were some in the city of Thessalonica who could be described by Luke, effectively, as 'loafers in the market place',<sup>7</sup> and I guess that it is at least possible that some of these had later been converted. But that is mere conjecture.

We *do* know, however, that many leading thinkers in ancient Greek and Roman society viewed manual labour with disdain ... as degrading and beneath the dignity of any cultured and respectable person – an activity fit only for slaves. And it *may* be that such views had affected the thinking of some who lived in the capital city of Macedonia.<sup>8</sup>

But, for whatever reason, there certainly were those in the church there who were all too ready to take advantage of the generosity of other Christians, and who were 'not working at all' – who, indeed, as we have seen, had not been working from the very beginning – hence the apostle's exhortation in his *first* letter, and – with a marked change of tone – his far sterner words in this, his second.

For, whereas Paul is careful to temper his authority as an apostle with tenderness – addressing the church as a whole as 'brothers', and speaking of the offenders as 'every brother',<sup>9</sup> he makes it clear that what he writes are 'commands'<sup>10</sup> and not simply advice ... that he is not offering suggestions – he is issuing orders! And his commands are as authoritative as Paul could have made them – 'in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ', and 'in the Lord Jesus Christ'.<sup>11</sup>

Several times, Paul uses the word 'disorderly', which scholars assure us was often used of soldiers, who, in one way or another, were out of step, or out of line – and which came to be used of anyone whose conduct was undisciplined.<sup>12</sup> As Paul sees it, the 'disorderly' at Thessalonica were certainly out of step with the consistent Christian behaviour of the others in the church.

'Draw back from' such, Paul commands, using a word which we are told was originally a nautical expression meaning to furl or roll up the sails of a ship<sup>13</sup> – and which came to be used metaphorically for someone who 'retreated into himself' – who withdrew himself ... here with the obvious meaning of holding aloof from – of shunning – of steering clear of – the disorderly brother. And, as we will see, the apostle uses even stronger language later.

In part, no doubt, one reason for such withdrawal was to avoid the bad testimony which would come on the church if some of its members were allowed to continue undisciplined for their improper lifestyle – and we remember that the believers at Thessalonica had more than enough opposition from outside as it was! But, as Paul spells out later, another – and possibly – and even more important reason was to bring on the offender a sense of shame, and thereby to pave the way for his repentance and restoration – the goal of every form of church discipline!

But, as the apostle makes clear in verses 7 to 9, the conduct of those who walked disorderly was contrary not only to *the instructions* which he and his companions had 'handed down' (the meaning of the word 'tradition') to the church, but it was contrary also to *the example* which he had set them while he was with them.

He speaks of his way of life when at Thessalonica in both *a negative* and *a positive* way ... reminding the believers, not only that he and his companions didn't walk disorderly or sponge on others for their support – and what a classic understatement that was – but that they had 'laboured' (to the point of weariness ... of exhaustion, the word means) and 'toiled' (expending exceptional energy, the word implies) and that they had done this around the clock.

Oh, he knew full well that the Lord Jesus had 'appointed that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel'.<sup>14</sup> But he had made it his practice when at Thessalonica ... as now at Corinth (from where he was writing this very letter – in between making tents!<sup>15</sup>) and as later he would at Ephesus<sup>16</sup> ... he had made it his practice to waive his right to support. Oh yes, he would accept gifts from the Philippian church to help with his expenses, but under no circumstances would he or his fellow-workers ever accept charity or financial help from those among whom they were then working – lest, as he said more than once to the Thessalonians, 'we might be a burden to any of you'.

Clearly, although Paul and Silas had stayed at the house of one Jason while they were at Thessalonica, they insisted on paying their way and ate at their own expense.

What a contrast. Paul and his fellow-workers, who had every right to claim it, looked for and accepted no support from the church, whereas the 'disorderly' brothers, who had no such right, were regularly sponging off the other believers. Paul and his fellow-workers not only worked at a trade but were occupied in preaching the gospel, whereas the 'disorderly' brothers were willing to do neither!

Paul next reminds the church of the oral instruction he gave before he left them 'that if anyone is not willing to work, neither let him eat' – where the emphasis lies on that word 'willing'. For it is important to note that Paul is concerned throughout, not with those who *cannot* work – who lack the ability or the opportunity to work – whether because of poor health or for any other reason – but with those who certainly *can* work, but who *won't* – who, according to the tense Paul uses, habitually refuse to ... refuse, that is, in the words of Genesis 3, 'to eat bread' in the sweat of their face<sup>17</sup> ... preferring to eat it in the sweat of someone else's face!

And we remember that the man who had once taught that, if someone is not willing to work, he must be brought to his senses by an empty stomach ... that this man devoted a considerable part of his time and energy in ministering to the bodily needs of those who were genuinely poor and who could do nothing to help themselves.

Referring to reports which he had heard of those who walked disorderly, Paul next introduces a play on words ... saying, literally, that they are 'not working' but that they are 'working round about' ... a Greek word meaning that they spend their time meddling in the affairs of others.

These lazybones, he is saying, have become busybodies. Failing to match up to the busy workers they ought to be, they have become the busybodies they ought not to be! In a word, they are minding everybody's business except their own.

On Friday evening I was listening to a gospel song which begins with the words, 'There are too many folks trying to take care of other folks' business, and they can't even take care of their own. But what they need to do is to take six months to mind their own business, and six months to leave other folks' business alone'. Both the chorus and the title of the song run, 'Sweep around your own front door'. I suspect that the apostle Paul would have enjoyed the lyrics – if not the music!

‘Such we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ that working quietly they eat their own bread’, the apostle says. Put bluntly, they should give their tongues a rest and give their hands some work to do.

‘For your part’, the apostle counsels those who have been busy doing that which is good – that which is excellent, noble and right, the word means ... for their part, he counsels them not to lose heart – not to flag – not to give up – not to let the few who refused to do *their* duty ‘keep you from doing *yours*’. ‘Don’t let the conduct of a few scroungers who have abused your generosity stop you from giving material help to those who genuinely need it – and certainly don’t allow *yourselves* to be infected by *their* bad example’.

If anyone deliberately and continually (as the tense is) disobeys our command and exhortation (given in the Lord’s name), Paul says, ‘mark him out, and have nothing to do with him’ ... ‘do not mix with him’, literally ... have no fellowship at all with him. Yet, although by shunning him you let him know that he is alone, and although by admonishing him, you let him know that he is in the wrong, always and ever regard him, not as an enemy but as a brother in the Lord ... let there be no bitter or unkind feelings towards him.

And Paul’s double prayer-wish for them is, first, that, through the troubled and stormy time they were experiencing, they might be sustained by the abiding sense of that deep-seated peace which comes – and only comes – from Him who is the ‘Lord of peace’. And, second, that they may experience, not only His abiding *peace*, but His abiding *presence* – which the Lord had personally and recently assured to Paul himself.<sup>18</sup>

In closing his epistle, Paul not only adds his greeting in his own handwriting, which, as he says, he does in every letter he writes, but *on this occasion* draws specific attention to the fact ... perhaps with an eye to any spurious letters which may still have been in circulation – such as he mentioned at the beginning of chapter 2.

We know that it was Paul’s practice to dictate his letters, and to simply add a few closing words himself – *sometimes* drawing attention to this,<sup>19</sup> but often *not*. We know also that this was very much the custom of the time. One great scholar has provided us with a fascinating example<sup>20</sup> from just a few years before Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians – an example which, as Professor Deissman notes, ...**PP**...’proves that somebody at that date closed a letter in his own hand without expressly saying so’.

And so, in one sense, the apostle closes his letter in much the same way as he began it ... with a reference to both divine *grace* and divine *peace*.

And, as I close, I can certainly do no better than to borrow Paul’s own words ... ‘Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all ... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Amen.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> 1 Thess. 5. 14.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Thess. 4. 10-12.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3. 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Pet. 3. 10-12.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 12. 42-46.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thess. 1.10 – see W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, article 'Wait', number 5.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 17. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Strabo, writing in the reign of Augustus, speaks of it as the most populous town in Macedonia and the metropolis of the province (vii.323, 330), and about the same time the poet Antipater, himself a native of Thessalonica, refers to the city as "mother of all Macedon" (Jacobs, *Anthol. Graec.*, II, p. 98, number 14); in the 2nd century of our era Lucian mentions it as the greatest city of Macedonia (Asinus, 46).

<sup>9</sup> 2 Thess. 3. 6.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Thess. 3. 6, 12.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Thess. 3. 6, 12.

<sup>12</sup> The quarters of the Chaldaeans were deserted, for they had run down into the city to get plunder from the houses. Cyrus at once called their officers together and told them to leave his army with all speed. "For," said he, "I could not endure to see men who are guilty of insubordination ('disorder') better off than others". 'The Life of Cyrus the Great', by Xenophon, 7. 2. 6.

<sup>13</sup> 'To gather up' (used of furling sails) ... to shrink from a person or thing. W. E. Vine, 'Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words', on the word 'Withdraw'.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Cor. 9. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 18. 1-3.

<sup>16</sup> Acts 20. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Gen. 3. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Acts 18. 10. Cf. 2 Cor. 1. 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> See 1 Cor. 16. 21; Col. 4. 16. And, for complete epistles written by Paul himself, see Gal. 6. 11 and Philemon 19.

<sup>20</sup> 'Mystarion to his own Stotoetis, many greetings. I have sent to you my Blastus for forked sticks for my olive-gardens. See then that you hinder him not. For you know how I need him every hour. [Then, in different handwriting ... ] Farewell. In the year 11 of Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus Imperator in the month of August 15'. From *Adolf Deissmann. 'Light from the Ancient East'. Pages 158-159.*

Professor Deissmann adds, 'Mystarion's letter, with its greeting and the rest of the conclusion in a different writing, namely in Mystarion's own hand, was written only a few years before Paul's second letter to the Christians of Thessalonica, and it proves that somebody at that date closed a letter in his own hand without expressly saying so'.