

# Clarity and Comfort

*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)*

*So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15 ESV)*

## **Godly Discipline**

**November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

**2 Thessalonians 3:6-18**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Thessalonians 3.

Today we conclude our series through 1 & 2 Thessalonians, and we're ending on a note that is unique to this series.

Taken as a whole, the general tone of these letters has been warm and encouraging. Paul wrote to give this young church clarity and comfort. But in this closing section, there is a notable change in Paul's tone. In spite of all of the wonderful things that were going on in this church – in spite of their faithfulness and perseverance – there was an issue that lurked beneath the surface. There was some sin in the camp that everyone knew about but that, apparently, no one was courageous enough to address.

This neglected sin was beginning to fester. Because that's what neglected sin does. Sin ONLY grows in the dark. Left unchecked, this particular sin threatened the witness of the Thessalonian church all-together. Hear that: In spite of all of the great victories in this Thessalonian church – in spite of all of their admirable attributes – this ONE sin threatened to make them a stench in the city.

Paul loves this church! We've seen that throughout these letters, haven't we? And what we discover in this final section is that, when you love someone, you're willing to tell them the truth –

even when the truth hurts. You're willing to give a sharp kick in the pants when a sharp kick is needed. That's what Paul's doing here.

Look with me now to 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. <sup>7</sup> For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup> nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. <sup>9</sup> It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. <sup>10</sup> For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. <sup>11</sup> For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. <sup>12</sup> Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

<sup>13</sup> As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. <sup>14</sup> If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. <sup>15</sup> Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

<sup>16</sup> Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.

<sup>17</sup> I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. <sup>18</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. (2 Thessalonians 3:6-18 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Before we dive deeper into this passage, there's something important that I want you to see. In order to understand why Paul is being so firm in this passage, we need to remember that this is not the first time that Paul has addressed this issue. In his first letter to the church, Paul wrote:

But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, <sup>11</sup> and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, **as we instructed you**, <sup>12</sup> so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one. (1 Thessalonians 4:10b-12 ESV)

We learn here that Paul addressed this issue when he founded the church. This isn't a new sin. Apparently, from day one, there were some folks who were inclined towards laziness. Paul confronted them when he was with them, and then he addressed the issue again in his first letter.

What we have in our text today is warning number THREE and Paul's tone has changed, hasn't it? Here's a Cole's Notes summary of our passage today. Paul is saying: GET YOUR ACT TOGETHER! Your sin and your silliness is making Jesus look bad in this city. So STOP IT!

That's the message. That's the tone. Our text this morning warns against two sure-fire ways to destroy your witness.

## Two Sure-fire Ways to Destroy Your Witness

In his first letter he told them to get to work:

**so that you may walk properly before outsiders** (1 Thessalonians 4:12a ESV)

The world is watching! They're watching the way that you live your lives and in this particular area, they are seeing some things that don't make Jesus look very good. At the close of his first letter, he wrote:

And we urge you, brothers, **admonish the idle** (1 Thessalonians 5:14a ESV)

YOU NEED TO DEAL WITH THIS.

That was the message in the first letter but, evidently, there was no follow through. And that leads us to the first sure-fire way to destroy your witness:

### 1. **Avoid hard conversations and ignore sin**

Now, on our first reading of this passage, it feels like Paul is primarily addressing the lazy folks in the church. Doesn't it? On the first reading, we're inclined to think, "Boy, Paul is really giving it to those free-loaders!" But look closer. Who is he primarily addressing in this passage?

He's addressing the whole church.

This was a whole church problem. This was a church that was too passive and too cowardly to deal with sin. This was a church that was too polite or afraid or indifferent to confront members who were openly living in rebellion. As one commentator summarizes:

Persistent and uncorrected sin not only spreads like gangrene within the church but results in a bad witness to the outside world.<sup>1</sup>

Remember, this is the THIRD TIME that Paul has addressed this issue! At this point, the problem is not simply laziness – the problem is rebellion. There is a group in this church that has rejected leadership and that has decided to do things their own way.

They aren't listening.

They aren't repenting.

And the church isn't dealing with it.

Therefore, Paul's approach is changing. He says in verse 6:

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you **keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness** and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. (2 Thessalonians 3:6 ESV)

“Enough is enough,” Paul says. “Quit tolerating this nonsense.” In a sense, what we have in front of us is a case study of Matthew 18. In Matthew 18, Jesus taught us how we should deal with people who are openly living in sin. He encourages a three-warning approach:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. <sup>16</sup> But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or

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<sup>1</sup> G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 264.

three witnesses. <sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Matthew 18:15-17 ESV)

That seems to be what's happening here. Paul warned them in person, then he warned them in a letter. Now, he's received a report that they STILL haven't repented. At this point, Jesus' instruction is to treat them as a Gentile or a tax collector. That seems to be the same point Paul is making in verse 14:

**If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. (2 Thessalonians 3:14 ESV)**

In other words: Let him be to you as an OUTSIDER. Make it clear that this person does not represent us because this person is refusing to resemble JESUS.

If someone is going to call himself a follower of Jesus then he needs to LIVE like a follower of Jesus. Not perfectly, of course, but INCREASINGLY. He needs to be turning from sin day-by-day. If he isn't doing that – if he's making excuses for his sin and rejecting all of the counsel that is spoken into his life – then you need to warn him, and then warn him again, but then, as an act of love for him and love for your witness you need to make it clear that his sin puts him OUTSIDE the camp.

But why? Why did Jesus and Paul make such a big deal of this?

I would argue that the most important lesson for us in our text this morning is the answer to this question. Why IS Paul so concerned about this? What right does he have to wade into the life choices of these other folks in the church? Those are the kinds of question that you ask when you are radically committed to independence. Independence is like a RELIGION for our culture. You can do almost anything in our country except this: Don't you dare try to tell someone else how to live their life. Right? We don't value authentic community. We don't understand it. We are relationally challenged.

“You do you.” That’s our mantra. And, church, we need to be honest with ourselves and acknowledge that we have been shaped by those convictions in more ways than we would like to admit.

But the church – the body of Christ – the FAMILY OF GOD – is fundamentally COMMUNAL.

The way that you live your life DOES matter to me and the way that I live my life DOES matter to you.

Have you ever tried to share your faith with someone, and you say something like: “Hey, you should come to church with me sometime! I go to Redeemer!” And then they reply, “Oh, you go to REDEEMER. I work with a guy who goes to your church and let me tell you what I’ve learned about Christians...”

Listen: Whether you like it or not, the way that you live out your faith in the workplace MATTERS to our witness. Christian, when you leave these doors and go out into the world, you need to understand that your life and conduct is going to be stored away in people’s minds. It’s either going to be added to a folder titled: “Wow! Maybe this gospel DOES change people?!” Or it’s going to be added to the file: “See! I knew they were all a bunch of hypocrites.”

Therefore, we as a community need to take holiness seriously.

We need to hold one another accountable.

When we see sin in one another, we need to be brave enough to have the hard talks.

Because, if we don’t, our witness in this city will shrivel up and die. If God’s Word doesn’t change people, then why on earth would anybody bother crossing the street to listen to it?

That’s the first surefire way to destroy your witness: Avoid the hard talks and ignore sin.

The second surefire way to destroy your witness is to:

## 2. Make your church a sanctuary for free loaders

Now, scholars speculate as to the root cause of this problem in Thessalonica. Some commentators suggest that these lazy people in the church refused to work because they believed that the Day of the Lord was imminent. That's plausible, right? If the Day of the Lord is around the bend, then why should I bother clocking in for my shift at the grocery store?

If that seems far-fetched, I could tell you a story about a time when a mentor in my old town took me out for coffee and tried to convince me not to further my education because the Lord was going to return before I'd finish my degree. There ARE people who think this way, so it's possible that this was what was going on in Thessalonica.

However, Paul never comes right out and makes this argument in his letter, and I'm wary of putting too much stock in our assumptions. Regardless, whether the laziness was motivated by bad theology or simple immaturity, Paul's point here is that the church is not to enable such people.

He says as much in verses 7-10:

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup> nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. <sup>9</sup> It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. (2 Thessalonians 3:7-9 ESV)

Paul is essentially saying: "If I could work even as I shouldered full time ministry while we got the church established – if I could work, even though I was MORE than entitled to receive compensation – then THESE FOLKS can work!" He goes on to say:

For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: **If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.** (2 Thessalonians 3:10 ESV)

This is a verse that makes us squirm in our seats a little bit, but Paul didn't feel the need to blunt his message. As one commentator notes:

The point of Paul's proverbial statement may be that the created order of this world, even after the Fall, requires all people to work in order to feed and support themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Paul's saying: It's not your job to shield lazy people from reality. He needs to learn how to work. He needs to feel the consequences that naturally come when he doesn't work.

Listen: God made us to work. It's wired right into us. It's why we tend to get into trouble when we neglect our responsibilities. It's one of the reasons why laziness often triggers and heightens depression.

Now, I want to make a very clear distinction here to try to head off some angry e-mails that are already been scripted in some minds. Obviously, there are some instances in which people are unable to work. Injuries and illnesses and other complicating factors all come into play in this fallen world. Of course. God's word calls us to care for the widows and the orphans and to take up the cause of the poor. Yes!

And, let me be clear, I am not in any way speaking politically here. These are instruction for the CHURCH not parliament hill, so I'm not endorsing or condemning your favorite political leader.

What Paul is addressing and condemning here is a church that is enabling laziness and calling it charity. THAT is what will ruin a church's witness.

Laziness is a sin that is even recognized by the outside world. Your non-Christian neighbor may not hold to your views of sexuality, but you can bet that she is annoyed by people who refuse to lift a finger and yet expect everything to be handed to them. That is true in our culture and it was true in Thessalonica. G.K. Beale observes:

Thessalonian culture would have considered people who refused to work ethically deficient. The point is that the actions of Christians should be ethically attractive to others and should result in being a good witness for Christ to the unbelieving world, so that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 256.

<sup>3</sup> G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 253.

This church seemed to think that they were modeling mercy.

But they weren't. They were modeling foolishness. Paul goes on to write:

For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, **not busy at work, but busybodies.** (2 Thessalonians 3:11 ESV)

These folks should have busied themselves with making a living but instead they busied themselves with making trouble! And the church was making it possible with their "charity"! As Charles Spurgeon once said:

I think that there are no people that have so much to say as those that have a little to do. Where nothing is done, much is talked about.<sup>4</sup>

That's what was going on. You can imagine Thessalonian Bobby, going from business to business in the city, telling stories, spreading gossip and causing trouble. And when people in the community asked: "How is it that Bobby can afford to wander around the city all day causing all these problems?" The answer was: "Oh, the *Christians* cover Bobby's bills."

Listen: We need to understand that a call to love and serve the poor is not to be confused with a call to enable people in their avoidance of responsibility. When we get that wrong, our witness suffers tremendously.

That's what was going on in Thessalonica. Two sure-fire ways to destroy a church's witness. Therefore, with the time that we have left, I would propose some resolutions for us here at RCC.

## Resolved

First, let's resolve to:

### 1. **Balance charity and wisdom**

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<sup>4</sup> Spurgeon. Sermons on Proverbs. pg. 207

We HAVE to get this right. There will never be a shortage of need in this city. And we're not allowed to turn a blind eye to that need. We're the Jesus people. Yet, as we seek to navigate through this calling, both charity and wisdom need a hand on the steering wheel at all times. Churches get themselves into trouble whenever one hand loses its grip.

We've talked about how a lack of wisdom can lead to a culture of enablement, and how that will ultimately ruin our witness. But it's important for us to see that, not only will it ruin our witness, it can also ruin our HEARTS! It's hard to give generously when you see that your resources are continually being misused and abused. I think that's what Paul was addressing in verse 13. After rebuking this pattern of laziness and free loading in the church, Paul felt it necessary to write:

As for you, brothers, **do not grow weary in doing good.** (2 Thessalonians 3:13 ESV)

I think Paul's saying, "You're probably tempted to become cynical after everything that's been happening here. After the way you've been used by these folks, you're probably tempted to quit with charity all-together. But don't do it. Add some discernment to your process, but don't grow weary of doing good."

These challenges are not unique to Thessalonica. Timothy was ministering in Ephesus and he found himself facing a similar problem. The city was full of widows and Timothy knew that God's word commands us to care for widows and orphans. Yet, the church simply didn't have the resources care for everyone. So, Paul wrote to Timothy and said:

Honor widows who are truly widows. <sup>4</sup>But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. (1 Timothy 5:3-4 ESV)

Paul says, "Families need to care for their families. It's not the job of the church to enable little Johnny to neglect his grandmother. The church's money should be used to support widows who have no one else to support them." He goes on to give some more qualifications that we don't have time to work through this morning, but all of that is to say, balancing charity and wisdom has ALWAYS been a challenge.

I confess, I have often been careless in my attempts at charity. I have received a few well-deserved wrist slaps from some brothers who have a firmer grip on the wheel with their wisdom hand. Some of us are all heart. Some of us are all head. We need both. That's why we have a number of men sitting around that elders table. Balance is hard work. But let's resolve to find and maintain that balance for the sake of our witness.

Finally, let us resolve to:

## 2. Deal with nonsense as it arises

We are naturally bad at this. When we see our brother or our sister going down a road that leads to ruin, every cell in our body screams at us: "Just leave it alone. Don't talk to him about it. What do you know, anyway?"

But we need to take sin deadly seriously in this place. Because sin that is left unchecked will ruin our witness.

And, more than that – we need to take sin deadly serious BECAUSE WE LOVE EACHOTHER! Right? That's actually how Paul follows up his command to call one another out. He writes:

If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. <sup>15</sup> Do not regard him as an enemy, **but warn him as a brother.** (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 ESV)

One commentator notes:

For the apostle... admonition never stems from a judgmental or vindictive spirit but rather is done out of genuine concern and love for others.<sup>5</sup>

We warn a brother about the sin in his life, not because he's an enemy but because he is OUR BROTHER! And we love him! And we want to see him living a life that pleases the Lord. We want to see him standing before the Lord one day hearing those words:

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<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 628.

Well done, good and faithful servant (Matthew 25:23a ESV)

Ironically, it is often our desire for peace that leads us to avoid these difficult conversations. But the kind of peace that avoids talking about the things that matter most is no peace at all. We've recently walked through that in our own denomination. Generations of avoiding the elephant in the room lead to fractured families. This young church in Thessalonica thought that they were extending mercy to these lazy brothers – they thought that they were preserving peace – but Paul knew that they were charting a course that would lead them straight to destruction. So, he changed his tone, he leaned in close and he said, “You’ve been ignoring this for long enough. It’s time to deal with it.”

Why? Because Paul wanted to disturb the peace? Because Paul was contentious? No – Paul called for this church to have the hard talks because he knew that **IT WAS THE ONLY WAY THAT PEACE WAS POSSIBLE**. Thus, right after commanding them to confront these brothers, he could pray in the same breath:

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all. (2 Thessalonians 3:16 ESV)

I have been with this congregation since day one. I love this church. But I will say that we will need to work hard to grow in this area. We love each other, and we love the peace that we enjoy in this community, but there have been times when we have ignored issues that needed to be addressed out of a desire to preserve that “peace”.

I believe that God is doing something special in our little church. But we will very quickly spoil that work if, under the guise of patience and mercy, we allow sin to fester and grow in our midst. Let's cultivate a culture in this place where accountability is commonplace. I want you to feel comfortable pulling me aside and challenging me after I lose my temper with my kids. I want you to feel comfortable looking your brother in the eye and asking him how he's doing in his battle with addiction. I want you to feel comfortable interrupting a conversation when it has degraded into gossip. I want this to be a place where we will call a brother or sister out if they're being lazy.

Not because we like conflict. Conflict is the worst. Not because the gospel is only for perfect people. If it were, none of us would be here. But because, when we walk out of the doors, we are going to meet people who are on the road to an eternity apart from God. We are going to meet people who are wondering if Jesus is real and if He really does have the power to change a heart. Does he really have the power to bring a dead marriage back to life? Does he really have the power to set me free from my addictions?

If there is ANYTHING in my life that would keep people from seeing that the answer to all of those questions is a glorious, resounding YES then for the love of God and the sake of our witness I need you to point it out so that I can let it go. That's what love looks like. That's what the church is supposed to look like.

So, let's get to work. Let's have the hard talks. Let's fight to preserve our witness so that each of us would truly be salt and light in the world. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.