

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

Gospel Integrity in Our Work 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12

Introduction

The beginning verses of 2 Thessalonians 3 focused on the Lord at work. Wherever we see gospel advance, faithful protection, Scriptural obedience, and heart devotion, we are looking at the results of God's work.

Now Paul shifts to the importance of the believers' faithfulness in their work responsibilities. The impact of the gospel is intensely practical. Christianity is not ivory tower mysticism divorced from everyday life. Paul has just expressed confidence that his readers are doing and will do the things the apostles command, like obeying orders given by an officer in the military. In verse 6 he gets specific about a troublesome area that has come to light in the church family.

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. ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ 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. ⁹ It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. ¹¹ For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹² Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

1. Church Accountability and Discipline (6)
2. Apostolic Example and Authority (7-10)
3. Personal Repentance and Responsibility (11-12)

1. Church Accountability and Discipline (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.

Paul has just prayed in 2 Thessalonians 3:5 that the Lord will direct our hearts into the love of God and endurance of Christ.

Being lazy and interfering with the business of others is unloving and is refusing to bear up under the load (endurance)

As such it misrepresents who Christ is and what He's like.

And because of that it also disregards the teaching the apostles had delivered to them

We command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—His known character, reputation, and authority. Those who are brothers and sisters in Christ as the family of God have a duty to perform as do soldiers under a commander. These orders backed the authority of Christ are for the church to carry out faithfully.

That tells us that this problem is flagrant enough to call for church discipline. It is at a level of protecting the integrity and reputation of the gospel. Jesus Himself stands behind their doing so, just as Christ Himself articulated in Matthew 18. If a sinning brother refuses to repent and be restored after private efforts by an individual believer and then two or three, and finally the entire church family, he's to be removed from the fellowship as one who behaves like an unsaved person. It is in that context that Jesus says in Matthew 18:18-20

18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. **20** For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

The NT does not call us to react this way to every misstep and disobedience, else we would have time for little else and would be joining with the accuser of the brethren. This kind of church discipline action is for sins that deny foundational gospel truths either in doctrine or in practice. According to Matthew 18 even sins like this call for private, individual confrontation at first in hopes of winning over your brother. And if a professing believer keeps refusing to repent until the point of the church removing him from membership, the goal is still to wake him up and bring him to repentance and restoration. If he never does so, at least the church is purified of those whose lives boldly contradict the gospel they profess.

In this case the sin is walking in idleness—out of rank, disorderly, idle, loafing; like an undisciplined army in disarray instead of working together in a coordinated effort. We want the word of the Lord to run and be honored. We don't want to give ammunition to the enemy to accuse the people of God.

Living lazy is not in accord with the tradition that you received from us—apostolic teaching delivered over to the Thessalonian believers

The gospel is all about restoring us to fellowship with God so that we can fulfill the purpose for which God created us in His image.

Significantly, that purpose is work oriented:
Genesis 1:28

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

The curse our sin brought on the earth and on ourselves makes work difficult. And sin turns our hearts toward laziness.

The command here is to the local church to exercise its responsibility to confront such gospel-contradictory living. The apostles and Christ the head of the church have delivered these orders and hold the church accountable.

Applications

- What do you find makes it hard for you to obey God's command to confront a brother or sister who is openly living contrary to the gospel?

- Why is shrinking from obedience in this area contrary to love?
- What do you think will be the eventual cost of a church's failing to obey the apostolic command in such matters?

2. Apostolic Example and Authority (7-10)

⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ 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. ⁹ It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

The apostles had a right to make their living by the gospel just like an ox working a field is not to be muzzled, so that it can eat along the way to give it necessary strength for the work it is doing.

But Paul often did not exercise this right in order to reduce the burden on those he evangelized and to set an example for them to provide for themselves rather than mooching off others.

Paul and his companions paid for their own food, toiling and laboring night and day to do so. His words speak of exhaustion and hardship to make this possible. They exemplified “working heartily as to the Lord” (Colossians 3:23).

We teach not just with our words but with our lifestyle. In fact, if the way we live does not match the doctrine we teach, we undermine the credibility of the doctrine. The apostles were careful to practice what they preached.

The same must be true of us. If we are praying for the word of the Lord to speed ahead, we don’t want our own lives to stand in the way of its progress.

This is the second time in our passage that we see the word *command*.

2 Thessalonians 3:10

For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

This order from the apostles is significant, because Christian love would normally dictate that if a person is hungry—even an enemy—you are to feed him. But when a professing Christian isn’t willing to work, but is lazy and idle, to feed him encourages his sinful lifestyle. And that lifestyle does him and those around him real harm.

Genuine love seeks to do good toward others. Aiding and abetting a lazy lifestyle that is contrary to gospel living is the opposite of love. The best thing for such a brother is to motivate him to work as he should. Food is great motivation for work.

Proverbs 16:26

A worker's appetite works for him; his mouth urges him on.

Not just about having a job where you get a paycheck. You don't have to have a job to be a good worker. There's always plenty to do to take care of our own things and to help others. If you sit around just because you don't have a job, the problem is not the lack of a job. It's the lack of obedience to God. Laziness is ungodly.

Applications

- In what ways are you setting a good example of a faithful worker to those who observe your life patterns?
- How can you train your children to do their assigned work in a way that honors the Lord and does not place a burden on others?
- If you waste your resources on those who could be taking care of themselves, what do you think happens to those who really do need your help?

3. Personal Repentance and Responsibility (11-12)

11 For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.

12 Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

Not busy at work

Instead

Busybodies—literally, around working—wasting one’s energies, meddling in the affairs of others

It wasn’t that they did not have the energy to be at work. It was that they were diverting their energy to what was a waste of time and a burden on others.

I often wonder when someone is known for meddling in the affairs of others, constantly complaining or acting as a armchair quarterback, “don’t you have anything else to do? What are you neglecting?”

Sideline critics are usually the worst. They tend not to understand what they’re criticizing, and they won’t lift a finger to help. They have no skin in the game.

Such persons we command and encourage—the third time *command* shows up. This time

directed toward the sinning persons themselves.

Paul adds the word encourage—to call alongside; coming alongside and exhorting them to do the right thing—picture a drill sergeant coming alongside a lagging soldier to get him to pick up the pace

He commands and encourages them in the Lord Jesus Christ—by His authority and for His glory because they profess to belong to Lord Jesus.

Quietly—as opposed to meddling in others' affairs

Earn their own living—literally, eat their own bread

These words recall what Paul has already written in his first letter to the Thessalonian church.

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

⁹ Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, ¹⁰ for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, ¹¹ and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to

work with your hands, as we instructed you, ¹² so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

That he's bringing this up again suggests that somehow the people he was addressing before didn't pay attention the first time.

So it was important that these idle brothers take seriously what he had already commanded. Note further the connection between living this way and living a life of love. It is not loving to make yourself a burden on others because you refuse to carry your own load of work. And such laziness is a turnoff to those outside the church who need to trust in Jesus as the Messiah and Savior.

Gospel integrity demands working to take care of your own needs. Godly people work not only to provide for themselves, but to have enough to help those who are genuinely in need.

Ephesians 4:28

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

Applications

- If you are finding yourself with idle time on your hands, what personal responsibilities could you be neglecting?
- When are you most likely to fall into meddling in matters that aren't your business?
- In what ways are you adding burdens to others that you should be taking care of yourself?
- What bad habits do you need to correct in order to advance the gospel with integrity for those you know need Jesus?

Conclusion

All this is rooted in your relationship to Jesus, in the transformation He works in those who are trusting in Him and have life from Him. What does that relationship look like for you?

May we practice and encourage gospel integrity in our working.

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Summary of Applications

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- What do you think will be the eventual cost of a church's failing to obey the apostolic command in such matters?
- In what ways are you setting a good example of a faithful worker to those who observe your life patterns?
- How can you train your children to do their assigned work in a way that honors the Lord and does not place a burden on others?
- If you waste your resources on those who could be taking care of themselves, what do you think happens to those who really do need your help?
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