

Injunctions for the Disobedient

2 Thessalonians 3:1-18

When problems are not solved, they grow worse. Often though, we think if we ignore problems, eventually they will go away. Yet any doctor can tell you that even what appears to be a small or insignificant injury can become infected. While playing High School basketball, I once dove for a loose ball and scraped my forearm. I didn't worry about it too much until two weeks later, it was red, puffy and oozing. Needless to say, the doctor had to end up inserting a needle, draining off the infection and pus and packing it with antibiotics. Inattention to a small problem led to a potential for major corrective measures.

Church problems are little different. If they are ignored, they grow worse and worse, infecting more and more people. The church is a body; and what germs are to the physical body, sin is to the spiritual body. This is graphically illustrated by the two letters to the church at Thessalonica. In the first, Paul warns the idle busybodies to get to work (1 Thess. 5:14) and told the elders to warn those who were unruly. Evidently, the problems continued for the second letter closes with several paragraphs devoted to this problem.

Now what is it that was infecting the church? The problem, like a disease, has its symptoms and its causes.

The symptoms were people who would not work and were using their idle time to go from church member to church member spreading error and gossip. Now they had what appeared to be a Biblical justification; after all, wasn't the Lord coming back very soon? They had time on their hands, gossip on their lips and arguments to back them up. They were misusing doctrine to excuse them from their duty. The end result was disobedience.

The cause of all these symptoms is quite simply they were disobedient. They were disobeying the orders of the apostles (v.6), the commands of the Scriptures (v.14) and the Biblical principles of Christian conduct clearly taught and modeled by the apostles and elders (v.7,10,12).

So what do we observe from the flow of chapter 2 into chapter 3? God is very concerned about our relationship to the Word of God itself and to those who, by teaching, are mediating the rule of God's Kingdom:

Chapter 2 - The **priority** of the Word

Chapter 3 - The **authority** of the Word

Paul has a passion for the Word of God (2:1-12), a passion for the truths of the Word (2:13-17) and a passion for obedience to the Word (ch. 3). We sometimes lack that same passion today. These paragraphs are going to force you to face the question, "How committed are you to submitting to and obeying the Word?"

Why all this talk, though, about commanding (v.4,6,10,12), obeying (v.4,14) and modeling (v.7)? Are we not under grace? Are we not free from living by commands and laws? Has Paul turned from theological grace to practical legalism?

Christ has brought us under the New Covenant *with its greater and higher obligations* and has *empowered us by grace* to actually keep those commands. The Word of God still commands us; but the grace of God now enables us. We have been set free, but set free *to obey God*.

What Jesus says is the foundation on which Paul builds. That foundation has these words inscribed on it, "Love for God is doing and dying: it is submitting to God's Word and sacrificing for God's people."

What then are given in this passage to stir up the grace that enables our love to obey?

A Motivating Examination

(v.1-5)

One of the privileges and disciplines of Christian living is prayer. One of the delights of Bible study is noting how Paul links his request for prayer with the paragraphs to follow.

¹ Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, ² and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. ³ But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. ⁴ And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. ⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

Its Petitions

(v.1-2)

"Pray for us", Paul writes. If Paul desired the prayer of the saints on his behalf for ministry then I am in desperate need of your prayers. I want this phrase, this idea to ring constantly in your thinking, *prayer must be the visible engine of all our efforts in ministry*. Prayer must be what is making ministry work—prayer energizing talent, shaping skill, clarifying insight, strengthening weakness, enervating fear and articulating truth. A prayerless ministry will be a powerless ministry.

Opportunity in the Ministry of the Word

Pray that the Word continues to be spread and honored. Literally, pray that the Word runs out rapidly like an advancing army and is acknowledged respected and revered. May the Word quickly spread and conquer.

Opponents to the Ministers of the Word

Pray that we will be delivered from the grip of sinful people. Pointedly, pray that we might be rescued from unbelieving people who have become twisted and gnarled by their sinning.

These two petitions establish two categories that motivate our obedience. Obedience arises from hearing and heeding the Word and disobedience will soon twist and gnarl us.

Its Perspectives

(v.3-4)

In contrast to people twisted by their sin, people who do not have faith, we have:

The Character of the Lord

The Lord is faithful. In the circumstances of faithless men, we have a faithful Lord. In His covenant mercy He will provide what is necessary to keep us from evil.

So we can never say that we must disobey.

The Confidence in the Lord

His confidence rests in the Lord whose purpose has enabled them and will enable them to obey. This phrase "in the Lord" is also a reference to or union with Christ. Since we are united with Christ, there is flowing to us the strength necessary in which we are now obeying and by which we will continue.

So we can never say that we are not able to obey.

Its Priorities

(v.5)

Paul requests prayer for himself in terms of *ministry*; he encourages them with prayer in terms of *maturity*. It is going to take maturity to hear and to heed what he is about to say . If they are going to be able to deal with the problems in the church, then they are needing a firm understanding and embracing of:

The Love of God

Their hearts must be pointed again and again to the love of God in devotion and duty, in doing and dying. They must avoid sentimentalizing the love of God to exclude duty and discipline. And they must not focus on duty and discipline to the exclusion of the graciousness of the love of God. As we have seen, God's love does not exclude, but rather demands obedience. And the love of God is poured out in the hearts of believers who then pour out their very lives *for the holiness of others*.

The Endurance of Christ

Their hearts must be pointed again and again to the endurance of Christ. Now this may refer to Christ's carrying through in total obedience to God in the face of opposition. It may also refer to His long patience with us who struggle with disobedience. His model of patient endurance in devotion, duty and discipline motivates us in the midst of the circumstances of our own and others disobedience.

This paragraph causes me to reflect on the importance of prayer:

It must be the visible engine all our efforts at ministry (v.1)

It is the vehicle of deliverance from the agendas of people twisted by their sinning (v.2).

It draws its strength in spiritual battles from the very person and character of God (v.3).

It turns my union with Christ into obedience to Christ; my position into my practice (v.4).

It focuses the gaze of my soul on the abounding love of God and the abiding endurance of Christ.

Before we can deal with the difficult problems, precepts and people of verses 6-15, we must be gripped by God's love and Jesus' endurance. When it comes to duty and discipline, love and endurance go together.

A Correcting Exhortation

(v.6-10)

These paragraphs actually deal with the problem itself. Our obedience is stirred both by the message of the Word and the manner in which it comes. So here are their responsibilities.

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.

In the Light of the Past Instruction

(v.6-10)

Because they had been taught these instructions and commandments in the past, they were being held accountable for it. This section is being addressed to the congregation as a whole.

Its Power

(v.6a)

The note of command and authority is unmistakable. Paul is speaking even as he instructed Titus, "*These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.*" (Titus 2:15) This authority is in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ. By virtue of our relation to Him and His revelation to us. This is not just Paul, or an elder or teacher: behind them stands the Lord of the church in whom we are united as brothers and to whom we owe allegiance.

The elders are to preach and exhort from doctrine to duty with authority.

Its Precept

(v.6b)

What is being commanded? We are being commanded to avoid, stay away, turn away from a category of people in the church. The word here means not to get mixed up with. When admonition fails, then segregation follows. This is not yet excommunication, but a lack of association. This probably should not require public announcement, except if people are unaware of it.

Who are being identified? These are people who were disorderly, out of step and disobedient. Their lack of self-discipline led them to idleness, gossip and theological speculation. These were nice, friendly people who used the time they should have been working to be meddling. But their sin was infecting the body.

The congregation is commanded to avoid associating with believers whose lives are marked by a lack of self-discipline and disobedience.

Its Pattern

(v.7-9)

What Paul commends to them here arises from what he has commended before them. He has lived out a model sacrificial labor so as not to burden the church. They knew the responsibility to work hard at one's vocation for it had been lived out in front of them. Are we willing to imitate Paul in this? Are we willing to forego our rights in order to offer ourselves a model for others to follow?

The elders must model the duties which are commanded for the congregation.

Its Principles**(v.10)**

When the church was being taught, this rule was laid down. The rule has not changed for them or for us. If a person is unwilling to work, he is not to be provided for even in the most basic necessities. Now note, it is not inability to work: it is an unwillingness to work. Those who are poor in the providence of God are to be provided for by the sacrificial generosity of the congregation.

The duty commanded here speaks to all. Whether your vocation is outside or inside the home, idleness must be avoided. You must work hard. Do not miss the application of this to wives in their duty at home, to children in their duty to school and employees in their jobs.

The elders must give clear instruction as to what Biblical duties are expected of the congregation.

In the Report of their Continued Problem**(v.11-13)**

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. ¹³ As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

Its Identification**(v.11)**

The report had come to Paul through Timothy about the disobedient. They were continuing to lead an irresponsible, undisciplined life. They were doing no work. Instead of keeping their bodies busy, they had become busybodies.

The disobedient are identified by indicating their specific sins

Its Injunction**(v.12)**

What they must do is repent. They must change. They must go to work and earn their own living. This is not a suggestion. This is not just godly advice. This is a command.

The disobedient are instructed and commanded in specific duties.

Its Instruction**(v.13)**

But for those who are working hard and watching others in the church flitting about, not working, gossiping and meddling in people's business, it was discouraging. To them Paul says keep on doing what is right.

We need this word as well. One of the great struggles faithful saints have in church ministry is watching unfaithful saints and wondering if it is worth it all. To you, God says to stay with it. Don't allow weariness to deter you. If the love of God can motivate you, let the endurance of Christ inspire you to endure in doing your duty till Jesus comes.

The obedient are commended and encouraged to continue in faithfulness to their duties and labors.

In the Case of their Future Disobedience**(v.14-15)**

The two verses answer two very important questions:

What if they continue to disobey? The actions then begin to become more public.

Is only this one issue (idleness) in view? No, the whole epistle and for us, the whole of Scripture, requires our obedience.

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. ¹⁵ Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

Its Action

(v.14)

The causes of discipline are broadened from idleness to any disobedience to the exhortations in the epistle. The resulting actions are more difficult as well for now the disobedient is identified publicly (marked), avoided in fellowship in such a way as to cause that person to be ashamed.

In our modern environment, this is almost unthinkable. That we would so embarrass a poor Christian who is struggling with disobedience by announcing their name and calling for Christians to not associate with them would ruin their self-esteem, is unloving, unkind and unworthy of us. And so, the terrible infection of sin rots our character, robs us of our power, ruins our fellowship and grieves God.

A little fear and shame and humbling would do our proud, sinning souls much spiritual good. It is sad to see individuals disobeying God; it is catastrophic to see a whole congregation disregarding God.

You see, when there is trouble in the church, it is usually that there is trouble in someone's heart.

Its Approach

(v.15)

Here is the attitude with which we do this. We treat them as brothers and sisters, not as unbelievers. We are not fellowshipping with them because they are out of fellowship with the Lord and the Lord's church. But, we are continuing to admonish them even as the Spirit is continuing to convict them. What is commanded is *remedial separation* in which *admonitional contact* is made but *personal fellowship* is avoided.

Now this gracious approach to sinning saints eliminates this form of discipline as a way for elders (or others in the congregation) to squelch accountability for their sins. This is **never** to be seen as retributive, but as remedial. The whole exercise of dis-fellowshipping is to shame believers so that they will obey God and His Word. There is also a wonderful restraining effect on humble, obedient Christians who are encouraged to continue to do what is right.

Those who persist in disobedience are to publicly identified, avoided and admonished as a brother so as to bring about shame, repentance and obedience.

A Comforting Expectation

(v.16-18)

The inspiration for the discouraged (Ch.1), instruction for the disturbed (Ch.2) and the injunctions for the disobedient (Ch.3) call forth three expectations from the church, both theirs and ours.

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

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Its Product**(v.16)**

We expect that in every circumstance, the Lord of peace will grant us peace by His presence. When we are discouraged by the pressure and stress of circumstances, persecution and affliction, the presence of Christ in those things brings a stabilizing calm. When misinformation and error distress us and cause us to lose our passion for the Word and for truth, then presence of Christ in His Word and in His people brings peace and passion. And finally, when the disobedient seem to flourish and the faithful struggle, when the difficult disciplines of the covenant community and family of God demand that we not associate with a brother or sister for their good and the purity of the church, then the chastening presence of our heavenly Father yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness.

That these messages ruin instead of promote the peace of the church simply indicates how far we have come from the apostolic church. So then the Lord of peace gives us peace by His provision and by His presence as the Lord.

Its Authentication**(v.17)**

We expect that this epistle and this word and this message will all be accepted as authentic truth because attached to it is By the attesting signature of Paul. We have this now as Scripture, as the deposit of apostolic truth. We know that it is genuine. Against all the claims to on-going revelation stands the completed canon with its final and authorized truth. *And it is this truth that we are preaching.*

Its Provision**(v.18)**

We expect the enabling grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. What do we need when we are discouraged, distressed and disobedient? We need the grace of God. How do we receive the grace of God? By the inspiration, instruction and injunctions that come from hearing the Word of God preached and taught with authority and integrity. So may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Reflect and Respond

Summarize the major principles in these paragraphs.

The elders are to preach and exhort from doctrine to duty with authority.

The congregation is commanded to avoid associating with believers whose lives are marked by a lack of self-discipline and disobedience.

The elders must model the duties which are commanded for the congregation.

The elders must give clear instruction as to what Biblical duties are expected of the congregation.

The disobedient are identified by indicating their specific sins

The disobedient are instructed and commanded in specific duties.

The obedient are commended and encouraged to continue in faithfulness to their duties and labors.

Those who persist in disobedience are to publicly identified, avoided and admonished as a brother so as to bring about shame, repentance and obedience.

In the preaching of the Word:

Authority - Let the Bible be preached and taught with authority. Let Christ be commanding us in the Word. If Biblical doctrine and duty are being commanded, then you ignore it with dire consequences.

Integrity - Let what is commanded in the public ministry arise directly from the text. Integrity in the Word demands that we do not tell you how to wear your hair, but we do tell you that you must study, pray, serve, give, love, work, etc.

Consistency - Let those who proclaim the Word model what the Word is commanding. You can expect your elders to study, pray, serve, give, love and work. And let us model it sacrificially.

In the obeying of the Word:

Submission - Let us be humble and obedient in submission to the Word of God. Am I here to critique the message and the messenger or does the message critique me? Am I consciously hearing the text commanding me and saying, "Yes, Lord"?

Self-discipline - Let there be strong commitment and firm self-discipline which leads to obedience, even when it costs us much. Do you notice how often a lack of self-discipline leads to sin? Do you see that self-discipline is a large key unlocking the door to personal holiness?

Endurance - Let us measure the level of our commitment by what it takes to stop us. Where has all our endurance gone? And we are not even facing real suffering, just minor inconvenience and stress! May God help us to run the race and finish the course.

In our dealing with the disobedient:

Love - Let us show the genuine love of Christ that instructs, exhorts, encourages, admonishes and disciplines. Let us not sentimentalize love—true love understands the necessity of the cross.

Firmness - Let us recognize that we have been saved to be a holy people. May we know with our understanding that our holiness is not just personal and private, but is also public and community. Let us be willing then to deal with the disobedient.

Brotherly - Let all our discipline be remedial and not retributive. May we, even when we must not associate, extend ourselves to admonish until God gives repentance.

Are you a part of the problems or the peace of the church?

Additional

From: Introduction

Yes, we under grace and not under the Old Testament system of law keeping. The difference is not that we have no commands, but that Christ has fulfilled the Law, brought us under the New Covenant *with its greater and higher obligations* and has *empowered us by grace* to actually keep those commands. Grace has moved us from the kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of His dear Son. The Word of God still commands us; but the grace of God now enables us. We have been set free, but set free *to obey God*. What Paul is doing is turning his theology of salvation by the enabling grace of God into the practice of sanctification by the grace of God.

Now this is not unique to Paul. Jesus told His disciples, *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me."* (John 14:15,21). Jesus laid the foundation for the second expression of love in these words, *"These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you."* (John 15:11-14). So the essence of love is submission and sacrifice. *"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* (John 13:35).

From: Particulars

This text has profound implications for our welfare society today. One or two aspects to highlight.

The church is responsible for its own. The Bible does not charge the church with the welfare of the general population. The generosity of believers to the poor is a matter of conscience and out of resources beyond the proportional stewardship to the church.

No welfare is to be given to the able but unwilling to work. Let them bear the consequences of their indolence. The Bible distinguishes between those who are poor because of God's providence and those who are poor because of sloth. The first is to be aided; the second to be admonished and avoided.

Coercive State welfare is not Biblical. The poor are to be cared for by those are able. The primary responsibility for the poor, the elderly and the handicapped is charged to their families.

From: Conclusion

New Testament examples of what is disciplined in the church:

Personal differences Philippians 4:1-3

Doctrinal error. The process is:

- (1) teach 2 Timothy 2:23-26
- (2) rebuke Titus 1:10-14
- (3) avoid Romans 16:17-18
- (4) separate 2 Timothy 2:18f; 2 John 9f

Entrapped in habitual sin Galatians 6:1-3

Repeating troublemaker Titus 3:10

Open immorality 1 Corinthians 5 (2 Cor 2:6f)

Open disobedience 2 Thessalonians 3