

How To Deal With The Disobedient

2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

Pastor John Miller

We now come to the end of our study in 2 Thessalonians. And I want to remind you that there are three chapters of this epistle and one subject in each chapter that Paul dealt with. In chapter 1, Paul encouraged the discouraged; they were being persecuted, and he wanted to encourage them in their suffering.

In chapter 2, he enlightened and instructed the deceived and those who were confused. They thought they were in “the day of the Lord,” in the tribulation period, because someone had falsified a letter to them, saying it was from Paul and that they were in “the day of the Lord.” They were told the Thessalonians had missed the rapture, which is a theme in this epistle. Paul said, “No, no!” “The day of the Lord,” the tribulation period, wouldn’t come until there was a “falling away,” which is the Greek word “apostasia.” Then the “man of sin,” the “son of perdition,” who is the Antichrist, would come. Those things have to happen before the tribulation comes.

Now we come to chapter 3, verses 6-18, in which Paul writes to exhort the disobedient or careless. John R.W. Stott said, “The apostle moves, in chapter 3, from the need to spread the Word in the world, verses 1-5, to the need to obey the Word in the church.”

In verses 1-5, we saw that Paul said, “Pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly...”—or “run its course”—“...and be glorified.” So he was praying for the Word to go out into the world. But now in verses 6-18, he switches and deals with the disobedient in the congregation in Thessalonica, who were not obeying the Word.

The problem in the church Paul had already dealt with in 1 Thessalonians. The problem was that some were believing that the Lord was coming soon—rightfully so—but in light of that, they weren’t working. They had become idle. Paul said they became “busybodies.” They were lazy and sponging off others in the church. Since they believed Jesus was coming soon and they would be raptured, why go to work? “Why work for food; I’ll just eat your food.” I don’t know what they were thinking; when your food ran out, what would they do? So they were basically lazy and not working. As a result, Paul command them to get back to work, to be quiet, to mind their own business and eat their own food. It was very practical teaching by Paul. This was actually “Christianity in shoe leather.”

So now we move from the theological sections in chapter 1 and 2 to the practical section in chapter 3, where Paul is dealing with the problem of disobedience in the church. They had not obeyed Paul, even though he spoke to them about this in his first epistle to the Thessalonians.

Now we will see that Paul tells the church to deal with the disobedient by giving them six incentives to motivate the disobedient. They were to repent, to get to work and to be obediently following the Lord.

The first incentive is dis-fellowship, verse 6. Paul says, “But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw...”—that’s the idea of dis-fellowship, that you keep away from, not mingle or associate with—“...from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.”

So notice that in verse 6, Paul issues a command. In the Greek, it is emphatic. And it’s a military term that he used four times in this chapter. In verse 4 he says, “We command you”; in verse 6 he says, “We command you”; in verse 10 he says, “We commanded you”; and in verse 12 he says, “We command and exhort.” So Paul is commanding them with very stern language. It’s not a suggestion, a recommendation, or if you feel like doing it; he’s giving them a military mandate or a command to obey God’s Word and keep His commandments.

Notice in verse 6 that he is addressing them as “brethren” and “who walks disorderly.” In this context, they were disorderly, but they were also believers. They misinterpreted and misapplied “the day of the Lord,” so they could be lazy and not work. Paul is writing to them as “brethren,” those in the church.

Paul is also speaking with authority. He is writing “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul could not be speaking with more authority than this. “We command you...in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul is speaking not only with his full, apostolic authority but with the authority of “our Lord Jesus Christ.”

He gave them the command in verse 6: “that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.” The word “withdraw” has the idea of “keep away from.” He’s not saying to excommunicate them. He’s not saying to kick them out of the church. He’s not saying, “Deliver such as one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” He’s saying to stay away from them, don’t have interaction with them, don’t fellowship with them. So he’s dealing with the discipline of those who are disorderly.

Notice that the text says, “who walks disorderly.” The word “disorderly” is also a military term. It means “to fall out of rank.” Paul is giving them a military command to get back into rank, to walk orderly, but they are walking disorderly.

Then he said that they are not walking after “the tradition which he received from us.” Don’t misunderstand the word “tradition.” It’s not talking about man-made traditions handed down, as we sometimes talk about traditions of denominations. Paul’s talking about oral teaching of the Scriptures. And Paul speaks with apostolic authority. The traditions here are equal in authority to the Word of God. The apostles were orally communicating the teaching in the Scriptures, the Word of God. And they were to be obedient to what they were told.

In Matthew 18, Jesus lays out for us steps we need to take when someone has wronged you or offended you. These fall into a little different category; they’re not necessarily for those sinning in the church and need to be disciplined. But it’s tied in to our text.

There are four steps in Matthew 18. Number one, if someone has offended you, wronged you or hurt you, you are to go to them privately.

One of the problems in the church today is when somebody is offended by someone in the church, the first thing they do is bolt and find another church. "I used to go to that church, but someone was mean to me, so I left and found another church." What do you do in that other church when they're mean to you? The old saying goes, "If you find the perfect church, don't join it, because it won't be perfect anymore." So they go from church to church to church trying to find the perfect church where no one will offend them or hurt their feelings.

So if someone has sinned against you, you are to go to them privately, before you go to the church or the leadership.

But if they don't listen to you, step number two is to take two or three witnesses. A lot of Christians don't have the courage and the love and the desire for the purity of the church to do that. They don't confront them with either their sin or the way they affected you or whatever the problem is.

If they don't respond to that, then step three is that you go to the church. And if they reject the church's rebuke or admonition, then step four is they are to be excommunicated and treated as unbelievers. And sometimes they are to be delivered over "to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."

You can see in our culture today where everyone is to be nice, no one is to be judgmental, no one wants to confront anyone to deal with sin—"Who am I to say they're wrong?"—but we need to do this for the sake of the health and life of the church. We're not "Gospel Gestapos," we're not Christian spies and we're not to have a critical censorious, fault-finding, judgmental spirit. Jesus said, "Judge not, that you be not judged." He was talking about not having a critical, fault-finding, censorious, judgmental spirit or attitude. So we're to go to them in love. For the sake of harmony and unity in the church and for the glory of God, we need to go in love to one another.

In this case in 2 Thessalonians, the disorderly were brothers, so the instruction was to simply not fellowship with them. I encourage you that when you're part of a church congregation you should not only come to church and get involved in fellowship, but if someone is walking disorderly in the church, if they're living in disobedience you need to stay away from them.

And then you may need to go to them privately to confront them to deal with their sin. You say, "Oh, I can't do that." But we need to do that. If they're professing to be a Christian, they're coming to church, they're a member of a congregation but they're living in open disobedience, habitually practicing sin, then they need to be dealt with, because "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." That doesn't mean we're perfect, but we all want to be obedient to God's Word.

So the overarching theme of this passage is that while we wait for the Lord to come back, we need to be obedient to His Word. It's so very important.

Our motive in church discipline is always love, and it is always for the purpose of restoration. It's not for the destruction but for the restoration of the offending party. So in this case, I would call it "dis-fellowship"; you don't hang out with them or fellowship with them. This is important to the health of the church and to its witness in the world.

The second incentive to motivate the disorderly, in verses 7-9, is example. Paul was our example. "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly..."—same word used in verse 6, which means "out of rank"—"...among you; nor did we eat anyone's bread..."—which is a reference to food—"...free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have authority..."—which is his "right" or "privilege"—"...but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us."

So the first incentive is dis-fellowship with them, and the second is to be an example to them that it might shame them into obedience to the Word of God.

In verse 7, Paul the Apostle said, "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us." From the words "follow us" we get our word "imitate" or "mimic." The reason Paul could say that is because he was following Christ. People can follow you if you're following Christ. They can mimic you if you're mimicking Christ. Paul was an example, and we should be one too.

Paul says, "For we were not disorderly..."—or "out of rank"—"...among you." He's specifically talking about those who believed the Lord was coming soon, so they didn't work, were lazy and were sponging off of others.

In verses 8-9, he said, "Nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge." They paid for their own food. Continuing, he said, "...but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have authority but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us."

What you learn from this text is that Paul had a right to be supported as a minister. The Bible says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain" and "The laborer is worthy of his wages." It says, "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double pay, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine." So they should be supported.

But Paul was going to forego or forfeit his right, so that he could be a blessing, not a burden. And that's what we should do. We will gladly give up our rights when we see our responsibility is to be an example to others. Paul was a good example and a blessing, not a burden.

That's what we should pray for ourselves. "Lord, make me a blessing. Make me a blessing to my wife [husband], to my children, to my friends, to my pastor, to my church. Out of my life may Jesus shine. May others see Jesus Christ in me." We need to be good, godly examples.

In order to deal with those who are out of line, out of bounds or out of order, we should be living in obedience as a godly example. We need to be a blessing, not a burden. We need to be

willing to give up our rights, that we might be examples.

Look at what Jesus did. He “made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant and...became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.” And Paul also says in Philippians 2:5, “Let this mind...”—or “attitude” or “outlook”—“...be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” Jesus also washed the disciples’ feet. He didn’t have to do that, but He came as a servant.

So Paul says, “I was one of those who served and worked among you.”

Now notice that Paul worked hard with his hands. He was a tent maker. He probably made tents at night and during the day preached the Gospel. So he was a hard-working example to the others.

I put together a list of the example Paul was. He was a model of Gospel preaching, 1 Thessalonians 1:6. He was enduring through persecution and suffering, 1 Thessalonians 2:2. He was a man of honesty and integrity, 1 Thessalonians 2:3-5. He was a man of humility, 1 Thessalonians 2:6. He was a man of gentleness, 1 Thessalonians 2:7. He was a man of self-sacrifice, 1 Thessalonians 2:8. He was a man who lived a holy life and was set apart to God, 1 Thessalonians 2:10. And he was a man of prayer, 1 Thessalonians 3:10. This is just a little sampling of how Paul lived an exemplary life before the believers in Thessalonica. It was all because he followed Jesus Christ. And we are to follow Paul’s example, as he followed Christ.

So don’t demand your rights, but give them up to be a blessing, not a burden, to others.

The third incentive to motive the disorderly, in verse 10, is survival. Paul says, “For even when we were with you, we commanded...”—again, this military command—“...you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.” Wow. That’s in the Bible. It doesn’t say, “cannot work”; it says, “will not work.” If you get hungry enough, you’ll go to work.

I remember pulling over on the side of the freeway to a guy who had a sign that read, “Will work for food.” I said to him, “Get in my car. I’ll take you to my house so you can mow my lawn, pull some weeds and I’ll pay you and feed you.” Then he started cursing me. So I said to him, “Your sign said, ‘Will work for food!’” He spit at me, cussed me and told me to get out of there. Why wouldn’t he work for food if that’s what he said he would do? I didn’t give him any money.

A few days later another guy had a sign that said, “Why lie; I need beer.” At least he’s honest; right? I didn’t give him any money either.

This is a principle spoken by Paul. But we don’t know where Paul got this. Some say it came from the Old Testament. Some say it was from rabbis. Jewish rabbis actually taught that if you don’t teach your son a trade, you teach him to steal. That’s why Saul of Tarsus, this intellectual giant, was taught how to make tents. So he always had something to fall back on. The Jewish culture and Christianity elevated manual labor. In the Greek and Roman culture, however, manual labor was despised. They thought that was for a whole different class of people. It’s

the same mindset today. But Christianity exalts manual labor.

So it says they “will not work.” They could work if they wanted to, but they wouldn’t work. This is something I believe we should think about today when we’re so quick to support or help people who will not work. A lot of people just won’t work. Right now you can get a job; there’s plenty of work out there. There are plenty of businesses looking for employees. So it’s not a problem of lack of jobs.

However, we do help those who cannot work. We should be benevolent and caring to those who can’t work. But we need to be discerning on who we support.

I want to give you a little survey in the Bible on the subject of work. A refusal to work is a violation of Scripture, Exodus 20:8-9. And the fourth Commandment says, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work.” It doesn’t say we should sluff off, goof off, sponge on people for six days. You work for six days, and on the Sabbath you rest. “And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done...He rested,” Genesis 2:2-3.

Even God worked. In Genesis 1, it says, “God created the heavens and the earth.” He created in six days. And I believe in six, literal, 24-hour days that God, in His infinite power and fiat, spoke the whole cosmos into existence. It didn’t take Him billions and billions of years to do that. And I reject evolution. I reject theistic evolution. I believe in the historicity of the first 11 chapters of Genesis. And there are a lot of reasons to believe that.

God was giving us a model, a picture that He Himself was a worker. And Jesus worked. He was a carpenter, but He also worked in the ministry when He said, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.”

Paul was a tent maker; Moses was a shepherd; David was a shepherd; and Peter, James and John were working fishermen, who had calluses on their hands.

Isn’t it interesting that we work as little as possible so we can go fishing? Peter, James and John got paid to fish; they were professional fishermen. Every man who God called into ministry in the Bible was a hard worker, doing a manual trade.

In Ephesians 6:5-8, Paul says, “Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eye service, as men-pleasers...”—not just when your boss is looking—“...but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.” So your motive on your job is to do it as “to the Lord.”

Years ago there was a bumper sticker on a car that I thought was weird. It said, “I owe, I owe, so off to work I go.” Every time I saw that bumper sticker I thought, What a bad motivation for work! What about, “I love, I love, so off to work to go”? I love my wife, so I’m working hard to

care for her. I love my kids, so I'm working hard to take care of them. I love my grandkids, so I'm working hard to lay up for my grandchildren. I love the Lord, so I'm working hard to be obedient to Him. I'm doing it from my heart, "as unto the Lord."

So whether you're driving a truck or whether you're putting plumbing together or work with electricity or are a used-car salesman—we'll pray for you after service—or whatever your profession, there is no separation for the Christian between the secular and the sacred. It's all sacred service to God. Whatever God calls you to do, it is to be done to the Lord for His glory. And when you get to heaven, you'll be rewarded for not what you did but for your faithfulness to what God's calling and will was for your life. That's the Christian ethic of work.

I believe that parents should teach their children the Christian work ethic. Train your children in what God says about work, and be an example and model to them.

The fourth incentive to motive the disorderly, in verses 11-13, is harmony. "For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner." Paul had gotten a report, so that's why he said, "We hear that there are some." So the disorderly group was probably small; it wasn't the whole church. Overall the church was strong and obedient and following the Lord's will. But a small minority of them were disorderly. They were "...not working at all, but are busybodies." So Paul makes it clear that the problem was that they were not working. Paul wanted them to work and be productive. It brings purpose and fulfillment in life.

They also had become "busybodies." In the Greek, there was a play-on-words here. What Paul actually says in this verse is that "Some of you are not busy, but you are busybodies." They were going around gossiping and getting involved in other people's business. What they should have been doing is working, minding their own business and eating their own food in a way that glorifies God. So the Word of God is to be kept by the obedient believer.

The point is that the busybodies in Thessalonica were an irritant, creating disunity and discord in the church. You don't want to do that. God hates disunity. Psalm 133 says, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"

Paul says, in verse 12, "Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread."

You don't want to be a burden; you want to be a blessing. You don't want to focus on your rights; you want to focus on your responsibility. You want to be an example to others in the church of God. Some were breaking the harmony rather than bringing harmony into the church. Someone said, "They were harmony breakers, not harmony makers."

We should walk in obedience, verse 13. "But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good." Now in verse 13, he changes the focus to the "brethren." This verse is a contrast. When he says that they should "not grow weary," that phrase means "lose heart" or "get discouraged." It talks about the inner heart. Don't get discouraged but rather keep doing what is right.

In context, this verse is a reference to work. Perhaps you are discouraged with your job. Some people have said to me, "Can I get hired at the church? I want to work around Christians. I don't want to work around heathens." Well maybe God put you there to be a missionary. Let your light shine. Maybe you're the only witness they're ever going to have. Be an example to them.

So if you're working, keep working. Don't lose heart. Don't be discouraged. Don't give up. In Galatians, Paul said, "Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart." And I believe God will reward those who faithfully do what God's will is for them. Keep doing the right thing.

The fifth incentive, in verse 14, is shame. So the other incentives are dis-fellowship, Paul's example, the need to survive, we don't want to break the harmony of the church and we are to shame those who are out of line or disobedient. "And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person..."—or "mark out that individual"—"...and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed." Paul doesn't say how to note them, but note them. We're not to have anything to do with them. In verse 6, he said to "withdraw from" them. The word "company" means not "to mix up with" them. Don't get involved with them. Keep your distance.

The word "ashamed" is an interesting word. It literally means "to turn in oneself." It means they start looking inward, into the heart. "What am I doing?! Why am I doing this?" They feel shame. We are to still treat them as brothers, but the idea is to shame them. The Amish have a procedure where they shun someone or shame them. I don't know if Paul is saying this to that degree, but when we live as a good example and we pull back from our fellowship with them, they look inside their own heart and will feel ashamed. The goal of this shaming is to always see them repent and get right with God and obey His Word.

The sixth incentive to motivate the disorderly, in verse 15, is love. "Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." Always the motive in disciplinary action is love. You don't want to convey the idea that you condone their actions by your fellowship. That's a very delicate balance. You love them but you disprove of their conduct, and you show that by pulling away from them, so they see that and feel ashamed and come back to God.

Love must always be the motive. Church discipline must always be done in love for the good of the individual, for the glory of God and for the purpose of restoration. The goal is always to restore them back into fellowship.

In verses 16-18, we have the conclusion of his epistle. Paul says, "Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord be with you all. The salutation of Paul with my own hand, which is a sign in every epistle; so I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen."

There are three elements to this conclusion. First, is a prayer, in verse 16; second, is a salutation, in verse 17; and third, is a benediction, in verse 18.

First, we have Paul's prayer. I like this. He says, "the Lord of peace." Normally Paul refers to "the God of peace," referring to God the Father. But this is a unique phrase that Paul uses here. There were a lot of stormy things going on in the church at Thessalonica: they were being persecuted, deceived, were lazy and disobedient, so Paul prays that God gives them peace. And when he uses the phrase "the Lord of peace," I believe that he is referring to Jesus Christ, who is called "the Prince of Peace."

So the peace can come from God the Father, "the God of peace"; it can come from God the Son, "the Prince of peace"; and it can come from the Holy Spirit, as well. It can come from all three Persons of the Godhead. But here Paul singles out "the Lord of peace."

Then Paul uses the expression, "Himself give you peace always in every way," which is interesting. So Paul keeps piling it on. He says, "The Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way." Paul was piling on the need for peace, which comes from knowing Christ. When you come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ, you have peace with God. Having peace with God, you can then experience the peace of God in your soul.

Paul talked about that in Philippians 4. When we have peace with God, then, in verse 7, he says, "...and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." The peace of God comes from trusting Him in our lives. What a blessing it is to have His peace! Peace comes from, or its source is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.

Peace is not found in alcohol, and it's not found in drugs. Peace comes from Jesus. All these other forms of escapism are not lasting; peace is found in Jesus Christ. This is so apropos to the storms that the believers in Thessalonica were going through.

Then Paul prays for strength. It's found in the verse 16: "The Lord be with you all." I like that. Notice the word "all." He prayed they "all" would get grace. So that would include the disobedient. It included those who were out of line. He prayed that "all" would have peace, that "all" would have the Lord.

When Paul prayed that "The Lord be with you all," it's not only talking about the presence of the Lord—it is that—but the idea is that the Lord's presence not only brings His peace, but it also brings His strength.

Have you ever been facing some very difficult challenge or situation in life, and you say a prayer of "Lord, I need you with me. Lord, be with me. Lord, don't forsake me. Lord, I need your presence right now"? The idea is that you need His strength to deal with the problem in your life. So God will give you His peace, and the presence of the Lord will bring you strength.

In verse 17, we see Paul's salutation where he takes the pen from his amanuensis—he had a secretary to whom he dictated his epistles—and would write the salutation with his own hand. It would have his own signature. This was apropos and fitting for 2 Thessalonians, because we read in chapter 2, verse 2, that someone had falsified a letter, forged a letter with Paul's name

on it to the Thessalonians that said they were in “the day of the Lord.” Paul wanted them to know that his letter of 2 Thessalonians was the real thing; this was his “John Hancock.” So he took the pen and signed the letter. That way they knew it was from him.

Then in verse 18, Paul gives the benediction. “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.” Again, Paul was including the disorderly in his benediction.

Paul's letters always opened with grace, and they closed with grace. We are saved by grace, we're sustained by grace and one day we will be completely sanctified by the grace of God in His presence.

I like John Bunyan's Amazing Grace in which he said,

“Grace hath brought me safe thus far,

And grace will lead me home.”

That is grace that saves me, grace that sustains me and grace that will take me to heaven. We need God's grace. Peace, strength and grace God gives to this church.

In conclusion, the Lord is coming soon for His church. But we shouldn't just sit around idle. We shouldn't quit our jobs. We shouldn't stop working. Jesus said we should “Occupy till I come” or “Do business till I come.”

The problem today is not that we're quitting our jobs, putting on white robes and sitting on a mountain waiting for the rapture. The problem today is that we forget that Jesus is coming back. And we work, work, work to get more and more things. Our priorities are wrong. We go the wrong direction. We know Jesus is coming, but we disregard that; we don't live for the kingdom of God.

I'm not saying we shouldn't work. I'm not saying we shouldn't have life insurance and have savings for retirement and buy a home. Those things are fine. But just remember to keep your perspective; the Lord is coming back, and “The things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” So don't get bogged down with the things of this world.

How are we to live in light of the Lord's return? We are to live obediently, in purity, in unity and in expectancy. Jesus Christ is coming again.