

A Study of 2 Thessalonians



The final section of 2 Thessalonians begins in 3:1 where Paul urges the church to pray for him and his companions so that the world might be evangelised. He expresses confidence in the Thessalonian Christians that they would endure because God is faithful and the church had demonstrated faithfulness in their lives for Christ.

In 3:6 there is a command to keep away from those in the church who were idle. Some believe the problem in Thessalonica came because the church believed Jesus would return at any time. If this is the case they must have thought work unnecessary. Why work if eternity is at hand? This may have been in their thinking, but some of the brothers may have been idle only because someone else would take care of them. It is possible that some were abusing the generosity of other Christians taking advantage of their kindness and willingness to share.

A Warning Against Idleness 3:6-15

Paul is forceful in verse 6 with a “command” he makes in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The word translated “command” is a word that is used to indicate an obligation to obey.



The instruction Paul provides is clear and straightforward: withdraw from any brother who lives an idle life. Idleness is not in accordance with what they had been taught and is not compatible with a life devoted to Christ. Paul can be forceful in this instruction because he had already addressed idleness in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 and 5:14.

Paul points to his actions and those of his companions when they first preached the gospel in Thessalonica. They had laboured so as to not burden the church. Paul says this should serve as a model of behaviour to imitate.

This passage does not teach that Christians should never rest; that would violate other principles of Scripture. Nor is this passage aimed at those who are unable to work because of a physical inability or lack of opportunity. The teaching is not designed to discourage generosity or caring for those in need. This instruction is directed at those who could support themselves, but instead rely upon other Christians to care for them.

1. Why would Paul instruct Christians to “keep away” from idle brothers?

2. How does Paul describe his hard work in 3:8?

3. Why did Paul and his companions work for their living instead of receiving support from the Thessalonian Christians? (3:8-9)

Paul and his companions had every right to receive financial income from the Thessalonian Christians, but they did not exercise this right. They did not “eat anyone’s bread without paying for it...” “Eat bread is a Hebrew idiom meaning “to get a living.”¹ Paul and the other missionaries paid for everything they received from the Thessalonians, even their own food.

The instruction in 1 Cor. 9:4-18 is that as an apostle Paul could expect to be supported by the preaching of the gospel. With idleness a problem in Thessalonica, Paul showed an example to follow by giving up what was rightfully his and working to earn his own income. It is likely he worked by day and preached by night; a witness that all could observe.

This teaching against idleness is pointedly repeated in 3:10. If a man will not work then he should not eat. Not only is the church under no obligation to help those who refuse to work, they are told to withhold help. Apparently this was such a problem in Thessalonica that Paul continually repeated the command to work and demonstrated the necessity of work by setting the example. Those who are able to work and support themselves should not expect the church, the government, or anyone else to take care of them. They are responsible for their own physical needs.



4. For what reasons might these “brothers” have preferred idleness to work?

5. According to 3:11 what filled the lives of the idle?

In verse 11 there is a play on words which is also seen in some English translations like the ESV and NIV. These Christians were not “busy” they were “busybodies.” Instead of being industrious and earning an income through their own labours, their idle time gave them opportunity to intrude into the affairs of others. They made it their business, to meddle in the business of others, when it was none of their business.

6. What motivates “busybodies?”

7. What command is given in 3:12?

The brothers are commanded to work “quietly” contrasting with those who obnoxiously intruded into the business of others. A Christian is to go about his business without fanfare while providing for himself and his family as he is able.

¹ Smith, James E. *Teacher’s Commentary: The Eschatological Epistles*. Lulu, 2011, p. 128.

In 3:13 the the topic moves to an encouragement to those who are doing right and working hard, not to give up. Don't grow weary, but doing good. It is possible for the hard-working Thessalonian Christians to see others idle, and become discouraged, or wonder why they shouldn't join them. Another possibility is that in light of the number of brothers who are idle some might begin neglecting the legitimate needs amongst the members of the church. If this is the case the instruction is to keep on doing good to those who need it while encouraging the able-bodied to work.

In the event that someone who is idle does not heed the instruction found in this letter, the other brothers are to disassociate with that person. Paul repeatedly taught the importance of hard work when he was present in Thessalonica and has now addressed the problem in two letters. After all this if a person will not heed the commandment to work then he should be excluded from fellowship. The reason for this "shunning" is to bring him shame so that he might repent. This person is not an enemy, but a brother in error.

Closing Prayer 3:16-18

The benediction is found in 3:16-18 with a prayer of peace for the church and that the church might know the presence of God in their lives.

8. Define peace as it is used in 3:16.



Earlier in the letter (2:2) Paul had written that some false letters might come claiming to be from himself or one of the other missionaries. Though Paul must have dictated the earlier parts of this letter he claims to have signed it in his own hand. There may have been some distinguishing style of writing that Paul used so that it could be observed and authenticated by those who knew his handwriting.

The final sentence is a prayer that God's grace might be with all the members of the church.

The extent of Paul's warning against idleness tells us that this was a significant problem in Thessalonica. It is possible that some thought the Lord would be returning any time and so had ceased working in anticipation of his coming; however nothing here indicates this is the situation. Whatever the reason some of the brothers in Thessalonica were not working, there is a strong call for repentance.



From Adam onwards God has expected man to busy himself with earning a livelihood by his own toil. Beginning in Genesis the Scripture also instructs there are to be times of rest and refreshment. The Bible teaches there is to be a balance between work and rest.

9. How can a Christian properly develop the balance between work and rest?

Men who are able to work are not to depend upon the generosity of other Christians to sustain them. On the other hand Christians are to generously share with others; especially other brothers in their times of need.² The example of the early church in Acts shows men selling their possessions to help other Christians.³ The Macedonian Christians showed themselves to be generous in their gifts to help those enduring the famine in Jerusalem.⁴

The church in Thessalonica faced many challenges. They endured persecution. They were unclear about some of the details concerning the Second Coming of Christ. Lawlessness was beginning to appear standing against the Truth. Some among them were not working as they should creating a burden for the others. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, writes to instruct the church in the areas where they lacked.

Throughout this short letter Paul assures that church that he is praying for them, that he has confidence in them, and that God could protect them and provide his peace. No greater statement could be made to end this letter than, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.”⁵

² Galatians 6:10

³ Acts 2:44-45.

⁴ 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-9; Rom 15:14-32; Acts 24:17.

⁵ 2 Thess 3:18.