

FAITHFULNESS IN THE MIDST OF UNCERTAINTY 2 Thessalonians 3:1-18

Objective: To remind us that faithfulness goes beyond how and what we **think** and impacts how and what we **do**.

As we become more global in our economy, we find ourselves exposed to various cultures and value systems. A significant concern for people who do business in other parts of the world is the “work ethic” of the people in a particular country. If the work ethic were lax in an area, then putting a production operation there would be unwise. Similar concerns are also mentioned for factories in this country. While we may be able to discern differences in various countries and regions within countries, such differences are also evident for individuals.

Observing people doing the same task is interesting. A variety of approaches can be taken to get the job done. Some will work steadily and make continual progress according to a plan. Others will put things off and try to cram everything into a very short time span. People also react differently to changes in circumstances that affect their work. If a target date for completion is moved up, some will work much faster to attempt to get as much done as possible while others will think “What’s the use, I can’t get it all done, so I’ll just quit now.”

On rare occasions, we read about groups who are convinced that the end of the world is near and their response is to go to some secluded (usually mountainous) place to await the event. What would you do if you knew that the Second Coming of Christ would take place day after tomorrow? Would we be as the person who had his target date reset and work much faster to do all he could? The alternative is to just give up because “we can’t get it all done.”

The church at Thessalonica was apparently very interested in the return of Christ. Some in that body of believers were essentially dropping out of life and not doing anything since they were convinced that Jesus would return “just any time.” These had become a burden on the local church. I’m sure they were very pious as they waited. This may have been a classic case of being “good for nothing.” We can understand and be patient with someone who is temporarily misguided in their zeal. However, for some, this lack of direction apparently had become a way of life.

Paul had to address such issues in his second letter to the church. The areas he wrote about were the same issue that are important in the church today and things that we need to be reminded of to improve our faithfulness. We need to be

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Praying for the Spread of the Gospel

¹ Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as *it did* also with you; ² and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith. 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2 (NASB95)

The specifics of the prayer were for the word of the Lord to have open entrance and good acceptance wherever it was preached or delivered. The second part of this request was for protection.

Paul’s request for prayer is a natural continuation of the end of chapter two where he penned a prayer for the church for them to be encouraged and strengthen in every good deed and

every good word. Sometimes we get complacent in what we have and forget that there is still a lot of work to be done in spreading the gospel to people who are perishing. In times past, we might think of some remote village in Africa or South America where there are people who have never heard of Jesus. There are places like that; however, there are places in northeast Tennessee where people are perishing because they haven't gotten the message of the gospel - they may have heard the words, but they just don't get it.

I'm not saying that we ought to immediately take off and go to Africa or South America or even across town, but we can certainly pray for those who are working in such areas and are sharing the gospel with people who need Jesus. The prayer needs to be for the effectiveness of the message and the safety of the messenger. Wherever the gospel is preached, there will be opposition. The opposition may come from another "religion" or opposition could come from those who may be impacted financially because their illegal drug sales might be lost. Now, if while you are praying for those who are involved and the Lord calls you to be more actively involved, then do it.

What is it that motivates us to share the gospel with another person or to pray for others who are actively involved in mission work? We can make a list of possible motivators and do some evaluation of how effective these motives might be in our lives.

Examples of Some Motivators

Jesus is coming back: How effective is this as something that would stimulate you to share the gospel or to pray for others who are involved? You could do a follow up question and ask, "So, why would that matter?"

Jesus told us to do this: Same questions

People are lost and if they don't hear the gospel and believe, they will die and spend eternity in hell: Same questions

It may help us to ask the question: "What motivated God to provide a means of salvation for us? John 3:16 answers that.

The love of God is in your heart: Same questions

Whatever the reasons we say why we are motivated to share the gospel, questioning "why?" should lead us to one of two answers: "Fear of the consequences of being disobedient" or "Loving people as God loved us." Which works for us? In the first case, it is something that you have to make yourself do and in the second case, it is something that you can't keep from doing.

Obeying Scriptural Commands

³ But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil *one*. ⁴ We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will *continue to* do what we command. ⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ. 2 Thessalonians 3:3-5 (NASB95)

To fully appreciate these verses we need to see them in the context of the prayer that Paul began in chapter 2 verses 15-17. Paul started by praying that they stand firm and hold to the teachings they had received from Paul. In this latter part of the prayer, Paul affirms that his prayer will be answered because God is faithful and He will continue to work in the lives of these Christians so that they would be faithful in responding to the Lord's call on their lives. The closing line of this prayer is really a request for God to work in such a way in their lives that would fully enable spiritual growth to be accomplished. By the Holy Spirit, the Lord directs our hearts into the fullness of the love of God that has been pour out into our hearts so that we live our lives in such a way that we emulate the faithfulness of Christ in all that we do and say and think. Living in such a way is pleasing to God and we realize that living in this way is only

possible because God is at work in us both to will and to do (work) of His good pleasure (Phil 2:13).

Behaving in a Responsible Manner

⁶Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, ⁸nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we *kept* working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; ⁹not because we do not have the right *to this*, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. ¹¹For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. ¹²Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 (NASB95)

In verse 6 we see that sometimes Paul took a stern approach in dealing with certain ones in various churches. As we examine his words, we find first of all that Paul is given them a command and secondly that he is not speaking on his own authority but as a representative of Christ. These errant brothers are described as "idle" in the NIV, "unruly" in the NAS, and "disorderly" in the KJV. Taken together we get the idea of people without any clear direction in their lives and no sense of purpose. Paul commanded others in the church to not associate with these. I don't think Paul would have us avoid everyone who is temporarily out of work or one who occasionally errs in his or her way. His concern was about those whose **lifestyle** was one of purposelessness and failure to maintain purity in their lives.

What would be the benefits of not associating with these people. There are at least two issues to consider. Paul addressed one of these in verse 14 which related to causing these "unruly" ones to be embarrassed. Another reason would be for the protection of the rest of the membership. The latter issue might be summed up in the adage "Bad company leads to bad behavior." Adults, even Christian adults, can be influenced by those with whom they associate. We would like to think that we could be a good influence on those who are idle, however, such relationships typically have to overcome what I call "spiritual gravity." It is easier to go downhill physically and the same holds true spiritually. Often relationships will find the "lowest common denominator."

In verses 7 through 10 Paul offered an example of what he did when he was with them. So often, we read Scriptures and devotional books about the Christian life and it seems rather remote and unattainable. We may slip into thinking that such a lifestyle is only a theoretical ideal. Such thinking can be dispelled by the presence of a real-life example.

Nothing hurts the advance of the Gospel as much as a person who professes Christ and lives as the devil. Conversely, nothing is more powerful in bringing people to Christ as a person who lives and dies by faith. Consider the impact that Stephen had on Paul. A person who lives what he professes is a powerful influence.

Paul reminded those at Thessalonica of the example set by the missionary team. They were disciplined, they paid their way and they worked hard. Paul also realized that actions need interpretation if the maximum benefit is to be achieved. Paul's interpretation involved the reasons why they did what they did. We can see these reasons in verses eight and nine: to avoid being a burden and to serve as a role model. Paul used the actions of the team as a teaching tool when he gave them a rule to follow: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." Such advice is easy to remember and is such good advice that, if followed today, might cure many social problems plaguing our country.

Paul had a message (in verses 11 and 12) for those whose had lost purpose in life because

they were waiting for the Second Coming. These were not doing anything useful with themselves, but they were going about interjecting themselves into the life and work of others. Paul advised them to find some meaningful purpose in life and be responsible for their own welfare.

Many in our own society have little or no purpose in life. They exist just for the moment and have little sense of responsibility for themselves or anyone else. Unfortunately, this condition also exists among those who profess Christ. When we compare the “idle ones” of our day with those whom Paul addressed, we are saddened to realize that people today are not looking for the return of Christ and don’t even have that as their reason for being idle. They just have never seen a connection with their life and some greater good that God is working to do. Many in the church have trusted in the truth of Ephesians 2:8 and 9 where Paul relates that “we are saved by grace through faith.” Nevertheless, they have not related to the very next verse where Paul said “We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **to do good works**, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Persevering in Doing Good

¹³ But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good. ¹⁴ If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. ¹⁵ Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. ¹⁶ Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all! ¹⁷ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write. ¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. 2 Thessalonians 3:13-18 (NASB95)

We sometimes trivialize the difficulty of godly living. When all is going well, we may say that “doing what is right is its own reward.” Those who would find themselves in jail for their faith in Christ might have some problem internalizing that adage. A person who has lost his job because he became a Christian might wonder if it is worth it all. A business man may have to forego profits or even go out of business because of his refusal to cut corners and he might wonder about such a saying. Often the “rewards” of doing what is right will not be realized this side of eternity. Additionally, all of us should have concern for dedicated Christian workers. After many years of faithful service some will become fatigued to a point they are ready to quit. We have read of missionaries who have worked for years before seeing the first convert come to Jesus. Paul’s advice to those faithful ones of his day was to not become tired of doing the right thing. Carrying out such advice is possible when we have hope grounded in the promises of God.

Paul returned to the subject of dealing with those who were disorderly (idle) in the church. Here he referred to those who do not obey the instruction Paul included in the letter to the church. Here we see the second reason to dissociate ourselves from those who are idle. Paul had hoped that they would “feel ashamed” and therefore get themselves involved in the work of the Kingdom of God. When Christians are involved in giving such feedback, we need to realize that our goal is restoration and not punishment. These are not our enemies but brothers and sisters in Christ.

What is the alternative if “shame” is no longer a motivator to do what is right? In 1983 Salman Rushdie authored a book entitled “Shame” and he stated “*But shame is like everything else; live with it for long enough and it becomes part of the furniture.*”

In 2003, Pete Hamill wrote in the New York Daily News,

The sense of shame is a kind of cement in any decent society. The fear of shame reminds each of us that some things must not be done. You don't become a criminal because you would bring shame to your family. You don't employ muscle against the weak. You don't beat up women or prey on the old. You don't

father children and then abandon them. You don't cheat or swindle because exposure would coat you with the tar of shame. You don't preach high ideals and live a lie. But it's clear that we are now awash in shamelessness. It's clear that the sense of shame needs to be revived and the shameless held to account.

When a person get to the point of being proud of that for which he should be ashamed, then we have evidence that such a person has been given over to a reprobate mind. It is truly a sad situation. There may not be a good alternative. However, as long as a person shows evidence of having a sense of shame for wrong behavior, then there is hope.

Paul ended this letter with a benediction of peace. If we are to find the peace that God gives, then we must make sure that the Lord of peace is on the throne of our lives.