

2 Thess 3 God's Word in the World and the Church

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We're finishing up our short series on 2 Thessalonians today. We began in chapter 1 with the uncomfortably graphic description of what happens to those who don't respond to the gospel of Jesus. Uncomfortable but important.

There's no point being an ostrich and hiding your head in the sand. We continued in chapter 2 with the warnings against the antichrist.

I encouraged you to respond

not by speculation about who the antichrist might be, but by standing firm to the apostolic teaching

which will protect you against the deception of the antichrist.

Today we are in chapter 3.

And as I said at the start of sermon series,

there something very difficult in each chapter of 2 Thessalonians.

Not today something uncomfortably graphic

like the description of the punishment of the ungodly.

Not today something scary and strange like the antichrist.

Today it's something easy to understand

but something that we simply don't do.

And something that when we're told to do it, many will respond,

God surely can't be expecting me to do that!

Yes he is.

But we'll get to that later.

We start with how our chapter divides.

There's a small bit and then there's a big bit.

3:1-3 God's word in the world

3:4-15 God's word in the church.

Paul begins by asking the Thessalonians to pray for him.

"As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us,

that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you."

When Paul asks the Thessalonians to pray for him, he's asking for them to pray for the success of his gospel ministry. He'd only spent three weeks with the Thessalonians before he was run out of town.

Their church was a testimony to the power of God to build his church. And what Paul wants them to pray is that God would be similarly powerful and active in his future ministry.

He's been in Corinth.

He plans to visit Rome and after that maybe to travel to Spain to preach there.

He'd love them to pray that the response to the gospel would be like it was amongst the Thessalonians.

He also wants them to pray for his protection.

"And pray that we might be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith."

When Paul goes into a city to preach, inevitably there are problems.

It might be the Jews in the synagogue who run him out of town because they don't want him stealing their members.

It might be the local manufacturers of silver idols like it was in Ephesus.

They got mad at Paul because he was costing them business.

Wherever Paul goes he runs into some form of violent opposition.

Sometimes he ends up in jail.

Sometimes he gets beaten or stoned.

Sometimes he just has to disappear at night and move on to the next town.

And so he asks the Thessalonians to pray for his protection.

Not because he wants a comfortable life,

but because it's important that the message of the Lord gets out.

Paul's next concern is

that in asking the Thessalonians to pray for his safety,

They may fear for their own safety.
 So he reassures them of God's faithfulness
 to keep his people safe from the evil one.
 3:3 "But the Lord is faithful,
 and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one."

That's God's word in the world.
 It's in proclaiming the gospel
 that lives are changed and people are saved for eternity.
 But God's word doesn't finish its work once we are saved.
 God continues to use his word to change us,
 to remake us in the image of the Lord Jesus.
 This is God's word in the church,
 the subject of the rest of the chapter.

How does God put his word to work in the church?
 Through the words of the apostle himself.
 Paul is not at all shy about claiming great authority for his words.
 Listen to how authoritative Paul's tone is.
 v4 "We have confidence in the Lord
 that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command."
 v6 "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you,
 brothers and sisters,"
 v10 "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule".
 v12 "Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ"
 v14 "Take special note of anyone
 who does not obey our instruction in this letter."
 He has the tone of a regimental sergeant major.
 He speaks and he expects that the Thessalonians will obey.

Now the question immediately arises in our minds,
 "What on earth do we do with that in the church today?"
 If Paul can dish out orders to a church he planted,
 can someone who plants a church today do the same thing?
 Can the bishop dish out orders like that?

Or the pastor of the church?

And if you are an Australian like me, you want to shout 'No'.

And I think that's the right answer.

But we have to work out why it's the right answer,

because there's no question Paul speaks into the Thessalonian church with full authority.

These people are Christians too.

They have God's Holy Spirit in them making them more like Jesus.

These are the people the prophet Jeremiah spoke about when he said,

Jer 31:34 "No longer will they teach their neighbour,

or say to one another, 'know the Lord,'

because they will all know me,

from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord.

These are the people the apostle John spoke about when he said,

1 Jn 2:27 "As for you,

the anointing you received from him remains in you,

and you do not need anyone to teach you."

And yet despite that,

the apostle addresses them in a very clear authoritative manner.

What's going on?

Well there are a couple of things we should realise.

1. We can't equate the way Paul speaks to the church, with the way church leaders speak to the church today.

Paul is an apostle, church leaders today are not.

In some traditions, people call members of the church today apostles.

They are not.

At least not in the sense of Paul and the 12 apostles in the Bible.

There is some very instructive writing from Ignatius of Antioch.

Ignatius was bishop of Antioch in Syria and the early second century.

That is he was just a generation after the last of the apostles died.

The apostle John died in the nineties.

Ignatius was arrested and taken to Rome to be executed.

On his way to Rome, he wrote seven letters to the churches.

In his letter to the church in Rome he said,

"I do not give you orders like Peter and Paul.

They were apostles.

I am a convict."

Now he was a bishop, a revered bishop in the early church.

But he was not an apostle.

He lacked an apostle's authority to give commands.

Church leaders today can't give commands the way the apostles did.

Or at least they shouldn't.

2. But Paul still speaks to the church with the same authority today that he spoke to the Thessalonians.

Why is it that the prophet Jeremiah can prophesy about a day when everyone of God's people will be competent to instruct themselves?

Because God will reveal his will through his apostles and we will all have copies of the Bible and be able to read them for ourselves.

And the Holy Spirit will illumine our minds as we read the Scriptures.

Paul speaks with authority

because it is through his words that we come to know God's will.

OK so what is it that Paul is commanding with such authority?

3:6 "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,

we command you brothers and sisters,

to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive

and does not live according to the teaching you received from us."

Paul's issue is basically slackers in the congregation.

Not people who won't help out with the dishes after church morning tea.

He means people who won't work full stop.

It seems that some of them were convinced

that Jesus' return was going to happen so soon,

that they thought they didn't need to work anymore.

And if people don't work,

that gives them plenty of free time.

So the slackers were also becoming busybodies with their free time.

Paul's command to the congregation
in the face of this poor behaviour is simple.
3:10 "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."
And he held up his own example
of working hard with his hands to support himself
when he was in Thessalonica.

Apart from the first three years of my ministry
when I was at St Matthew's Prahran,
most of my ministry has been in congregations
where the majority of people were retired.
That is the last 16 years of my ministry,
the bulk of my church have been retired.
It has seems kind of hard to know
how to preach a passage about the importance of work
to those whose days in the workforce were behind them.
But I was struck by inspiration.
There are actually different ways to be retired.
You can be retired and productive
or retired and self indulgent.
And so Paul's command actually applies to the retired
just as much as to those who are working age or indeed school age.
I've been impressed by the grandparents I've noticed
during this pandemic
who have picked up child care responsibilities for their grand children
when the child care centres have been closed.
I'm always impressed by those who beaver away
at useful activities in their retirements:
whether that's folk in the Op Shop, or helping with play group,
or volunteering at WPCS, mentoring a Kid's Hope child,
leading a Bible Study, serving on PC, or mowing the church lawns.
John Stott wrote a book while has was in a nursing home.
His mind was still exceptionally sharp when he was 86,
even when his body was failing him.

Friends we don't know when Jesus is going to come back.
 But when he does,
 we'd like to be found doing something productive.

So I've saved the tricky bit for last.

What happens to those who refuse
 to listen to Paul's command to work for their living?

This is the bit where Paul's command is very clear.

There's no problem understanding it.

The only problem is doing it.

3:6 "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,

we command you brothers and sisters,

to keep away from every believer

who is idle and disruptive."

3:14 "Take note of everyone

who does not obey our instructions in this letter.

Do not associate with them,

in order that they may feel ashamed."

There's no problem understanding what Paul is saying here, right?

If people profess Christian faith,

and they refuse to live by the clear teaching of the apostles,

then we are to keep away from them,

to disassociate ourselves from them.

I have absolutely no problem at all understanding what he's saying.

And I recognise that this instruction is not isolated to this passage.

You can find it in 1 Cor 5.

You can find it in 2 Timothy 3.

You can find it on the lips of Jesus in Mt 18.

No question that this is what we are instructed to do.

It's just putting it into practice that is very difficult in the church.

What are the problems?

1. The only religious organisations

that practice this kind of sanction towards the disobedient are cults.

Let's not mince around.

The Jehovah's Witnesses do it.
The Mormons do it.
The Exclusive Brethren do it.
No one else does it.
That doesn't seem like a ringing endorsement.

2. If you engage in any sanction like this,
the person who you don't associate with
can just go down the road to another church.
Let me tell you a story.
When I started at St Matthew's Prahran,
the minister there had just asked the church Treasurer to resign.
She had been engaged in an adulterous affair for more than a decade.
Everyone in the church knew about it.
No one had done anything.
They didn't feel like they could.
She was doing a key job that no one else could handle.
And she gave the most money towards the running of the church.
Well she was asked to resign.
She did resign.
And she went straight down the road to another church
where she was welcomed with open arms.
But God grew St Matthew's in Prahran.
The other church never grew.
St Matt's went from 30 people to 120 people on a Sunday
over the next 4 years.

Despite the problems,
we are called upon to do what the apostle commands us to do.
We are called upon to follow the Lord Jesus.
Jesus gave the church apostles to instruct us.
Now we do need to manage things differently
from the JWs and the Mormons.
They tend to exercise this kind of church discipline
when anyone disagrees with the church hierarchy.

Or they shun people who leave the church.
It's an attempt at cult like control.
Notice that Paul is not attempting cult like control of church members.
He wants those whose lives are going in the wrong direction
to be ashamed and repent.
But that's not to be applied
where there is a disagreement with a church leader
or a personality conflict.
It's only to be applied where someone's life
opposes the teaching of Jesus and his apostles.

Sadly we do have this situation in the Anglican Church today.
Church leaders whose lives and teaching about sexuality
fly in the face of the teaching we have received from the apostles.
The command of the apostle is clear.
We should have nothing to do with them.
That's difficult to achieve when we inhabit the same organisation.
But it is unmistakably what we are commanded to do.

So where have we come from today?
God's Word is active in the world.
And God's Word is active in the church.
In the world we need to pray
that God's word might spread rapidly and be honoured.
In the church,
we need to value and make use of the opportunity to be productive.
And we need to be prepared to separate ourselves
from those live in a way that is contrary to God's Word,
recognising that the command of the apostle is the command of God.