

Paul has been peering into the future. He has said that the man of lawlessness has not yet appeared, but there is a secret power of lawlessness that is already at work in the world (2 Thess. 2:7). How should we, therefore, behave in our present situation?

Chapter 3 answers this in part.

3:1 Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you;

3:2 and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith.

In verse 1 Paul requests that the Thessalonians pray for him. “Pray” is a present imperative—a command that means “pray continually.” As Morris says, “He looks not for a perfunctory petition, but for continuing, prevailing prayer” (Morris, 244).

Paul asks that they pray (1) that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, and (2) that he and his companions be rescued from perverse and evil men.

Literally, verse 1 reads that the word of the Lord would “run” and be glorified. Frame translates it “that the word of the Lord run its race.” Psalm 147:15 has the same imagery: “His word runs very swiftly.” Paul wants to see the gospel moving quickly, like a runner covering great ground.

Paul also desires that the word be glorified. Glory is something that arouses admiration (see notes on 2 Thess. 2:14). In short, he wants the worth and greatness of the gospel to be seen and appreciated. This was what happened in Thessalonica and Macedonia (“just as it did also with you”).

Secondly, Paul asks that he and his co-workers be delivered from the enemies of the gospel (3:2). The way this is worded indicates that Paul is *not* asking for prayer about something that *could* happen in the future, but he is speaking about something that he was experiencing as he wrote.

3:3 But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

3:4 We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command.

3:5 May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

Verse 3 switches gears rather abruptly and contrasts the faithlessness of non-Christians (3:2—“not all have faith”) to the faithfulness of the Lord (“but the Lord is faithful”). “As so often in Paul’s writing, Paul turns from the difficulties of man to God on whom all men depend” (Morris, 246). “The Lord” is most likely a reference to Christ as verse 5 indicates.

Because Paul was confident that the Lord was faithful and would strengthen and protect the Thessalonians from the evil one (Satan; 3:3), he was also confident that they would continue on in the faith and be obedient to the word they had received (3:4). Paul did not put his trust in the power of men but in God. Although believers are responsible to obey the word of God, the only reason they will do so is because God is working in them, prodding their faith into action. Philippians 2:12–13 is another example where Paul commands Christians to act, but credits God as working behind the scenes: “work

out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

Paul does not assume that they will be delivered from Satan’s attacks, but that they would be strengthened in faith and conduct, and be victorious in the midst of temptation and trials. Jesus prayed in John 17:15, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.”

In verse 5 Paul desires that Christ (the Lord) direct their hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ. Although we have been given a new heart when we believed, the Lord must still actively incline our hearts to keep His commands.

“The love of God” can refer either to God’s love for us or our love for God. It is difficult to know which is intended; both are necessary. “The steadfastness of Christ” denotes Christ’s patience and means either to follow the example of His perseverance, or to have the perseverance that He inspires.

3:6 Now 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.

3:7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you,

3:8 nor 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;

3:9 not 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.

Verse 6 addresses an ongoing and unresolved issue in the church. In 1 Thessalonians 4:11f. and 5:14 Paul mentioned people who refused to work; he called them disorderly and told them to work with their hands. But evidently his exhortations had not produced the change that he was hoping to see, so in the closing chapter of his second letter to the church he devotes considerable space to this problem. What is striking about this section is the authority by which Paul commands the church. He uses the word “command” or “obey” five times. Both are military terms used of commands given by an officer to his men. He also uses imperatival verb forms (verbs as command) and twice refers to the authority of Christ (in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ).

Verse 6 tells believers of their responsibility toward a brother who refuses to work. Paul not only commands the church to listen to him, he does so in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (with the authority of Christ). In a word, believers are to withdraw from brothers who refuse to work. This is to be done because the offending brother is living in disobedience; he is unruly and not keeping the traditions that had been passed down to them (for notes on “traditions” see 2 Thess. 2:15). Disassociation was to force the erring person to know that his actions have created a rift in fellowship with other Christians.

Sadly, this is a command that few take seriously today. Many Christians simply pick and choose what they want to obey and this is one that they often choose to ignore. There is something fundamentally

abnormal with a Christian who shares the word of God with others (3:1–3) but disregards it in their own lives (Stott, 188).

In verses 6–10 Paul uses his own life as a model of Christian conduct and he insists that they “ought” to follow his example—“ought” means “must.” “Must” leaves no room for interpreting this as just a suggestion. This is a classical understanding of discipleship—a disciple conformed his thinking and life to that of his master. Although Christ is our Master, the Bible tells us to imitate those who imitate Christ.

- Philippians 3:17: “join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.”
- 1 Corinthians 4:16: “I urge you, then, be imitators of me.”
- 1 Corinthians 11:1: “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.”
- Philippians 4:9: “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

In this passage (2 Thess. 3) Paul commands believers to follow his example of work. Rabbis were all taught a trade since they were not allowed to ask for a fee for their services. Paul was a tentmaker (Acts 18:3), and supported himself and his companions (Acts 20:34; 1 Cor. 4:12). It should be noted, however, that some churches also supported him in his travels (2 Cor. 11:7–9; Phil. 4:16).

Paul had a right to make a living from his preaching (3:9). In 1 Corinthians 9:7–10 Paul argues that workers, such as soldiers, farmers, and shepherds, all have a right to be compensated for their labor. Then in verses 11 and 12 he concludes that what is true of them is also true of those who preach the gospel; Paul was well within his rights to be compensated by the Corinthians for he had sown spiritual seed among them. “In the same way,” he says, “the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (v. 14).

Also see:

- Galatians 6:6: “One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches.”
- 1 Tim. 5:18: “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,’ and ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages.’”
- Matthew 10:10: “the worker is worthy of his support.”

In spite of this, Paul declined to use his right. In verse 8 he says he did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it. “To eat bread” is a Semitism (Morris, 253). It doesn't simply mean to eat a meal; it means to make a living (Gen. 3:19; Amos 7:12, etc.). Although Paul surely received meals from others without paying for them, he never relied on others as a means of livelihood.

Paul willfully waived his rights so that nothing he did would become a stumbling block for the gospel (1 Cor. 9:12) or burden others (1 Thess. 2:9). Refusal to accept monetary remuneration not only eased the burden of support on others, it demonstrated the purity of his motives; he proved to be unlike the charlatans who preached for material gain.

However, Paul's policy of self-support came with a cost. It required considerable effort on his part. "Labor and hardship" describe work that involves intense physical activity or effort and forms a stark contrast to those who did no work at all. The difficulty in being self-supporting is made even more emphatic by the statement that he and his companions worked "day and night." They worked incessantly. They had little rest. They had little leisure.

Paul's point is simple. Although as an apostle he had the right to be paid for his preaching, he did not receive monetary support from the Thessalonians. Instead, he worked hard to support himself. His work ethic was a model for others (3:9).

3:10 For 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.

3:11 For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies.

3:12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.

3:13 But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.

Paul's teaching was not something new. The church had already been instructed, "if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either." The emphasis is on the will. "If anyone won't work, refuses to work. . ." The continuous tense of the verb means that it is a habitual attitude. Proverbs 16:26 says, "A worker's appetite works for him, for his hunger urges him on."

It is clear from this passage that work is part of biblical morality. People who refuse to support themselves are described as "leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies." For this reason, believers should not support them. The individual should be left to reap the consequences of his own laziness.

Verse 12 turns to addressing the offenders directly: "Such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread."

Once again, Paul's words are again very strong—he both commands and exhorts, and he does so by the authority of Christ Himself (in the Lord Jesus Christ). But his desire is that the sinning brother be won back.

In verse 13 he tells everyone, "do not grow weary of doing good." In itself, this is very general. But in the context, it most likely relates to not growing weary in bringing the erring brother back into the fold.

3:14 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.

3:15 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

"The need for discipline does not arise from some trivial offense which can be dealt with discreetly in private, but from the public, deliberate and persistent disobedience to plain apostolic instruction. . . The

Christian standard in this matter was not in doubt. But the culprits were showing a spirit of defiance. It was those who obstinately refused to obey who, Paul said, must now be disciplined” (Stott, 193).

“The nature of the discipline which Paul demanded was a measure of social ostracism. The idlers had already received a general admonition. But because they had disregarded it, the loyal church members were to keep aloof from them. Then, if anyone continued in disobedience, they were to take special note of him, which implies some form of public censure, and not to associate with him” (Stott, 193).

The verb “to associate with” is used in 1 Corinthians 5:9, 11 where Paul told Christians not to associate with professing believers who were openly guilty of such offenses as immorality, dishonesty, idolatry and drunkenness. The verb, however, may allow for different degrees of ostracism ranging from total separation to excommunication.

Verse 15 shows that the motive behind ostracism is not hostility, but is to be done in a spirit of love for the well-being of the erring brother. The action is to make them feel ashamed and repent so that they would walk in a way that honors the name of Christ.

3:16 Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!

3:17 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write.

3:18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

It seems to be the custom of Paul, as it was for many in his day, to use an amanuenses (someone who wrote the letter as another dictated what to write) to record his letters. When he was done, Paul would read through the letter, add a greeting himself, and sign it to authenticate the document. He did this often (1 Cor. 16:20; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; Phile. 1:19).

NOTE:

Work was God’s design for man from the beginning.

Genesis 1:25–31:

25 God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

27 God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

28 God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

...

31 God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

“Man” (Gen. 1:26) in Hebrew is the word *adam* (אָדָם) and is related to the word “ground” (אֲדָמָה - *adamah*) in Genesis 1:25. אֲדָמָה (*adamah*—“ground”) is “soil capable of cultivation.” “Man” (אָדָם-*adam*) would, therefore, be ‘the cultivator of the soil’” (Leupold, 88; cf. Gen. 2:4–9, 15, & 3:17–19). “Man” (אָדָם) is also the proper name “Adam” in Genesis 2:20 and is also used of humanity in general in 1:26–27 where “man” (אָדָם-*adam*) is said to be “male and female” (cf. 6:5).

Genesis 2:4b–5 says, “. . . in the day that the LORD God made earth and heaven. Now no shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground.” This takes us back to the work of creation on the third day and highlights some particulars of the creation account. Evidently, God held back the sprouting of certain types of vegetation until man was placed upon the earth to cultivate the ground. This does not mean that all plant life was stopped from growing, but specifically “field shrubs” and “field plants” (Leupold, 112–113). A field (שָׂדֶה—*sadeh*) most often refers to land fit for cultivation, so field plants were plants that required man to cultivate them. Exactly what these plants were is unknown. As Hamilton says (I, 153), “If plant life is to grow in the Garden, it will be a joint operation. God will do His part and man will execute his responsibilities. Rain is not sufficient. Tillage is not sufficient. God is not a tiller of the soil and man is not a sender of the rain. But the presence of one being without the other guarantees the perpetuation of desert-like conditions.”

In other words, humans were created to work. In Genesis 1:26–28 male and female are called to exercise dominion over the whole creation and this begins with tilling the ground. After Adam and Eve sinned, work became toil (Genesis 3:17–19), but work itself is not a punishment for sin.

Exodus 20:9–11 commands man to work for 6 days each week and rest one. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.”

God is omnipotent; He did not need to literally rest; rather, the creation account is a pattern for man to follow.

In the Bible, work has multiple purposes:

1. Work is the God-ordained means by which people are to meet their needs.

- 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12: “make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and *work with your hands*, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and *not be in any need*.”

When people who are able to work refuse to do so, they are a burden to others.

- 1 Thessalonians 2:9: “For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.”
- 2 Thessalonians 3:8: “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.”
- 2 Corinthians 11:8–9: “I robbed other churches by taking wages from them to serve you; And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way.”

Welfare paid to people who are simply too lazy to work reduces the income of families paying taxes; spouses or adult children who don't work burden other family members; believers who refuse work often burden fellow believers and receive money that should be going to people with real needs.

2. In a fallen world, work allows people to help others who have less.

Throughout the Old Testament, God gave the Israelites specific instructions about how to do their work. He also gave instructions about providing for those who had less: “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 23:22). This command confirms the importance of work. God does not tell the people to harvest everything and then simply give food to the poor. Instead, He tells them to leave enough of the grain to allow the poor to work for themselves. Work has a way of giving us a sense of purpose, productivity, and dignity.

- Ephesians 4:28: “He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, *so that he will have something to share with one who has need*.”

- Acts 20:34–35: “You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs *and to the men who were with me*. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must *help the weak* and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”
- Galatians 6:10: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

In sum:

The Bible says, “For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land’” (Deut.15:11). But societies and individuals that entice people with free food and housing are rejecting the design of God. We should encourage people to work and help those who cannot do so. Our welfare system often does the opposite: it traps people at the lowest economic level by indiscriminate giving. To qualify for support, most recipients must show only that they are not working, not that they cannot work. The consequences of government welfare are often negative. Many people develop a sense of entitlement that prevents them from ever wanting to work. Some make more money by being on welfare than by having a low paying job. But this is dehumanizing. Supporting these people is just as unscriptural as not supporting those with legitimate needs.