

## LESSON 11

### The Idle Problem (2 Thess. 3:1–18)

#### The Place of the Passage

If persecutors were the primary problem behind 2 Thessalonians 1 and false teachers the problem behind 2 Thessalonians 2, idlers or loafers are the problem in 2 Thessalonians 3. After requesting prayer and giving assurance to the Thessalonians in light of God’s faithfulness (2 Thess. 3:1–5), Paul transitions to warn those in the church who are refusing to work (2 Thess. 3:6–15). He then concludes the letter with a benediction and personal farewell (2 Thess. 3:16–18).

#### *Definition: Benediction*

A prayer for God’s blessing at the end of a letter or a worship gathering. Many NT letters include a benediction.

#### The Big Picture

In 2 Thessalonians 3:1–18, Paul takes up one final issue present in the church: the sin of idleness (2 Thess. 3:6–15). His discussion is prefaced by words of assurance (2 Thess. 3:1–5) and concluded with words of blessing (2 Thess. 3:16–18).

#### Reflection and Discussion

Read through 2 Thessalonians 3:1–18, the passage for this week’s study. Then review the following questions, recording your responses and taking notes on the final section of this letter.

#### Prayer and Promise (2 Thess. 3:1–5)

For what two things does Paul request prayer in 2 Thessalonians 3:1–2? In what sense has 2 Thessalonians 3:1 already “happened among [them]” (see, e.g., 1 Thess. 1:4–5; 2:13). And who, in this context, are the “wicked and evil men” mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 3:2?

In 2 Thessalonians 3:1, Paul likens the word of God to a victorious runner. Perhaps Psalm 147:15 is echoing in his head: “He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.” Luke uses similar personification at several points throughout Acts (e.g., Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). What does such language suggest about the nature of God’s word?

#### A Word to Loafers (2 Thess. 3:6–15)

How many times does the word “command” appear in 2 Thessalonians 3? Why do you think Paul keeps using such a strong word?

What kind of “tradition” had the Thessalonians “received” (2 Thess. 3:6)? See also 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:13; 4:1; 2 Thessalonians 2:5, 15.

2 Thessalonians 3:8 is not Paul's first reference to his example of tireless labor. Where in his first letter did he draw attention to his work-related conduct?

In 2 Thessalonians 3:8–9, is Paul saying that it is wrong to receive payment for gospel ministry? (See also 1 Cor. 9:3–14; 2 Cor. 11:7–9; Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17–18.) What was the nature of his "right" (2 Thess. 3:9), and what was his motivation for relinquishing it (see 1 Thess. 2:9)?

Paul lifts up his team as "an example to imitate" (2 Thess. 3:9). Earlier, he had commended the Thessalonians for becoming "imitators of us and of the Lord" (1 Thess. 1:6). Can you think of anywhere else in the New Testament where Christians are called to imitate God? What about imitating other Christians?

At the end of his first letter, Paul had instructed the church to "admonish the idle" (1 Thess. 5:14). Here in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15, he zooms in on this issue, since it obviously remained a problem (see 2 Thess. 3:11). How does Scripture's wisdom literature help us understand the nature and dangers of idleness (e.g., Prov. 6:6–11; 10:4–5; 19:15; 21:25–26; 24:30–34; 26:13–16; 31:27; Eccles. 10:18)? What do we learn about idleness from the teaching of Jesus (Matt. 25:14–30)?

In which area of life are you most tempted toward idleness? Take a moment to identify any disordered desires and false beliefs that may give rise to this tendency in your life. How does the gospel counteract the idolatry that leads to idleness?

It seems likely that 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15 refers to a final stage in the process of church discipline, just short of excommunication (since the offender in view is still considered a "brother"). What warrants exclusion from church membership, according to Jesus and Paul (Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:1–13)? What is the ultimate goal of formal church discipline (2 Cor. 2:6–8)?

### **Peace and Grace (2 Thess. 3:16–18)**

Why do you think Paul concludes this letter with an emphasis on the Lord's peace and presence (2 Thess. 3:16)?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to consider the Personal Implications these sections may have for you.

### **Gospel Glimpses**

**FAITH.** Paul has the audacity to link the presence of evil with the absence of faith (2 Thess. 3:2). Lack of faith is not innocuous; it is deadly serious. It prevents a virtuous life (Rom. 14:23; Heb. 11:6) and, most importantly, prevents eternal life. "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8). Scripture is clear that faith—active reliance and trust—in Jesus is necessary for salvation. Faith is a divine gift (Acts 18:27; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; 1 Tim. 1:14) that

connects a sinner to the source of divine righteousness, Jesus himself. The blessings that are his by right become ours by grace. Through trusting in him we stand righteous before God the Judge and can enjoy an intimate relationship with God the Father.

## Whole-Bible Connections

**WORK.** The Bible is clear that work is a good gift from a good God. Crafted in the image of a working God (Gen. 2:2–3), humans are designed for labor: “God blessed [Adam and Eve]. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’ . . . The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Gen. 1:28; 2:15). After the rebellion in Eden, God cursed human work by making it difficult (Gen. 3:17–19; see also Eccles. 2:18–24). The difference between Genesis 2 and Genesis 3, then, is the difference between work and toil. Although our labors are often marked by frustration and fruitlessness, God’s people are exhorted to work with faithfulness, diligence, and excellence, for his glory (see, e.g., Eccles. 9:10; Col. 3:23–24; 1 Cor. 10:31; 15:10). In addition to imaging and pleasing our King, work is a vitally significant means of loving our neighbor and advancing the common good. Indeed, because Jesus is alive, our labor for him is never in vain (1 Cor. 15:58; Gal. 6:9); on the contrary, it anticipates the renewal of all things under his eternal rule.

## Theological Soundings

**PEACE.** “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way” (2 Thess. 3:16). Rooted in the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, the biblical vision of peace is not simply the absence of conflict but the presence of wholeness and flourishing. The Thessalonians would have seen the empire slogan—*pax romana* (“the peace of Rome”)—plastered everywhere in their capital city. The message was plain: “If you want peace, submit to Rome.” Yet God’s people know that true peace has never been found in a culture or government; it has been discovered, however, by millions in the Lord Jesus. As Paul declares elsewhere, “[Christ] himself is our peace” (Eph. 2:14; see also Mic. 5:5). And as Christ promises in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:9). The good news of Christianity is that the Son of God himself came to earth and became the ultimate peacemaker—vertically (Rom. 5:1–2) and horizontally (Rom. 12:18). As ambassadors of this Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6)—the one who secured peace through his shed blood (Col. 1:20)—we are to be the people who “seek peace and pursue it” (Ps. 34:14; see also 1 Pet. 3:8–12).

**CHURCH DISCIPLINE.** In 2 Thessalonians 3:13–14 Paul seems to be referring to a late stage in the process of church discipline, just short of excommunication. What is church discipline? In short, Jesus gives churches the authority and obligation to remove from membership and the Lord’s table those who will not repent of sin. If membership is a church’s formal *affirmation* of one’s profession of faith (“We believe your profession to be credible”), discipline—culminating in excommunication—is the formal *removal* of that affirmation (“We no longer believe your profession to be credible”). Since Jesus’ bride, the church, is to be marked by repentance, unrepentance disqualifies one from becoming or remaining a church member. Described in

passages such as Matthew 18:15–20 and 1 Corinthians 5:1–13, church discipline is spiritually vital because unrepentance is spiritually lethal. It belittles the holiness of God, trivializes the seriousness of sin, undermines the preciousness of the gospel, and confuses all—church and world alike—about what it means to follow Jesus. The ultimate goal of discipline is not retribution but restoration, a beautiful picture of which is seen in 2 Corinthians 2:6–8 (perhaps in reference to the offender from 1 Corinthians 5).

*Definition: Lord's table*

A reference to the Lord's Supper, one of two ordinances or sacraments (along with baptism) entrusted to the local church. Jesus instituted this commemorative new covenant meal at the Last Supper (Luke 22:14–23), and Paul discusses its meaning and practice in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34. If baptism is the local church's front door, the Lord's Supper is the family dinner table. If baptism binds one to many, the Lord's Supper makes many one.

### **Personal Implications**

Take time to reflect on the implications of 2 Thessalonians 3:1–18 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Note the personal implications for your walk with the Lord in light of the (1) Gospel Glimpses, (2) Whole-Bible Connections, (3) Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. 2 Thessalonians 3:1–18

### **As You Finish This Unit . . .**

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you near the end of this study of 2 Thessalonians. Take a moment also to look back through this unit of study and to reflect on some key lessons the Lord may be teaching you.

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