



10. 2 Thessalonians 2:13 – 3:18

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2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

¹³But we must always give thanks to God for you,
brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord,
because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation
through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

¹⁴For this purpose he called you
through our proclamation of the good news,
so that you may obtain the glory (or 'so that you may be the glorious
possession) of our Lord Jesus the Messiah.

Paul returns to the theme of thanksgiving. He wants to reassure the Thessalonians that in his concern for them because of the alarm caused by some of their members he has not lost sight of the wonderful things that God is doing in their community. They are loved by the Lord Jesus. They have nothing to fear from the coming of the day of the Lord. They have been chosen by God (see 1 Thessalonians 1:4) from the time that they first opened their hearts to the gospel. God is gracing them ‘for salvation’ (see 1 Thessalonians 5:9) and they are being made holy by the Spirit who is transforming their lives. They have put their trust in God’s love and are living accordingly. Our Lord Jesus wants to share with them his glory.

Paul is offering them another criterion for discernment: the quality of Christian living. They are to be attentive to the action of the Holy Spirit in the community.

2 Thessalonians 2:15

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

Here is another criterion for discernment: authoritative teaching (see 2:5; 3:6). They are to ‘stand firm’ (see 1 Thessalonians 3:8) and ‘hold fast to the traditions that you were taught’.

In our day, through hard experience, we have become very conscious of limitations and abuse in the exercise of human authority, in states, but also in churches. We have been liberated from naive and blind obedience and have become wary of following directions just because they claim authority. While this reaction is obviously necessary, and in itself healthy, it ceases to be good when it leads us to the opposite situation in which we presume to make up our own mind on everything, and dismiss all authority except that which convinces our own limited intelligence.

The text on which we are reflecting warns us that if we do not worship the true and living God, we will create our own; if we do not believe the gospel, we will find ourselves putting our faith in things other than the gospel; if we neglect the wisdom of authentic tradition, we will find ourselves prey to all kinds of deceptions. Jesus advised us to be 'wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (Matthew 10:16). Let us pray for the wisdom to perceive when authority is being abused, and for the honesty not to follow such authority as an excuse for avoiding the truth. Let us pray also for the innocent docility that is grateful for the genuine authority that comes from centuries of wisdom in the human political community and in the churches.

True wisdom is the fruit of sanctity. It does not contradict reason, but it does go beyond it, opening us to receive the revelation of God. While we grow in discernment, let us never lose the docility of a child who expects to learn from authority.

Paul's words here assist us in our reflections on the relationship between the written scriptures and tradition. Paul, Silvanus and Timothy had shared their faith-experience with the Thessalonians in many ways before this or the previous letter were composed. The missionaries had lived with them, worked with them, prayed with them and reflected with them on the significance of God's revelation in Jesus. Together they had found ways of celebrating their shared faith, and had worked out various implications for their manner of living (see 1Thessalonians 4:1). All of this is part of what Paul refers to as 'the traditions that you were taught by us'. Paul is writing his letters and they are being read from within this living tradition. As Paul wrote in his first letter: 'When you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers' (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

The written words of Scripture must always be read within the context of the inspired words of the praying and faith-filled community, for the Spirit of Jesus remains active among Jesus' disciples, guiding us into the fullness of truth (see John 16:13). To be distinguished from tradition, which is the handing on of wisdom, faith, prayer and the Christ-life from one generation to the next, are the human traditions which inevitably develop when the faith takes root in human culture. Some of these give expression not to the essence of faith but to various limited and passing views. Such traditions need renewing and revitalising from one generation to the next and from one culture to another. Stephen had hard words to say of some Jewish traditions (see Acts chapter 7), as does Paul on many occasions. They are but mirroring the attitude of Jesus who complained: 'You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition ... You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!' (Mark 7:8-9).

We can learn from the past, but we must constantly test the past. We have to keep revitalising traditions to ensure that we are in touch with the faith of those who have handed the faith on to us, and not just with their practices. We must also have the courage to exercise the freedom given us by the Spirit to find new ways of giving expression to the life of Jesus in the changing circumstances of our lives. We must be 'like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old' (Matthew 13:52). There is always an element of surprise in the action of the Spirit which 'blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit' (John 3:8). 'New wine must be put into fresh wineskins' (Luke 5:38).

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

Now may our Lord Jesus the Messiah himself and God our Father loving us and through grace giving us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort [singular] your hearts and strengthen [singular] them in every good work and word.

This is a pastoral letter. Paul is concerned that the persecutions may prove too much for them. He sees, too, how vulnerable they are to the temptation to escape into the unreal world of those who are getting all excited and alarmed about the day of the Lord. He has attempted to settle the minds and hearts of the Thessalonian Christians by the clarity of his teaching, and especially by recalling what he has said about the central place of faith and love in their lives. The negative experiences that threaten to overwhelm them are trials. If they persevere they will survive them and be purified by them.

Paul's sentiments are echoed by Ignatius of Loyola when he prays to God: 'Your love and your grace are enough for me'.

They are echoed also by Teresa of Avila:

Let nothing trouble you.

Let nothing frighten you.

Everything passes.

God never changes.

Patience obtains all.

Whoever has God wants for nothing.

God alone is enough.

Paul realises, however, that teaching is not enough. His prayer is that they will find comfort from the one to whom they have committed their lives, and from God who is their Father. God alone can give them a comfort that is 'eternal', a comfort that is not dependent on the chance circumstances of this world. We are reminded of Paul's words to the Galatians: 'The life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

Now may our Lord Jesus the Messiah himself and God our Father loving us and through grace giving us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort [singular] your hearts and strengthen [singular] them in every good work and word.

As in Galatians 2:20, so here, the aorist participles are better translated by the present in English: God is ‘loving’ and ‘giving’. Paul is calling them to ‘hope’: to put their trust in God’s love and to leave the future confidently in God’s hands so that they can focus their attention on the call of Jesus, which is to live, here and now, lives of love. For a reflection on ‘hope’ see 1 Thessalonians 1:3. It is also noteworthy that the verbs ‘comfort’ and ‘strengthen’ in verse seventeen are singular in Greek, not plural: ‘our Lord Jesus the Messiah’ and ‘God our Father’ are considered as one because of their complete love-communion (compare 1:12 and 1 Thessalonians 3:11).

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you, and that we may be rescued from wicked and evil people; for not all have faith.

But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will go on doing the things that we command.

May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God [genitive] and to the steadfastness of [genitive] the Messiah.

We have a glimpse here into the heart of a tireless missionary, longing to spread the ‘gospel of the Messiah’ (1Thessalonians 3:2), which is ‘the word of God’ (1Thessalonians 2:13; Acts 13:48), so that everyone will see the wonder of God’s love. Sadly, not all believe (see Romans 10:16), but God remains faithful (see 1 Thessalonians 5:24) and Paul is confident that God will strengthen the Thessalonians in the trials they are having to undergo (see 1Thessalonians 3:13 and 2Thessalonians 2:17).

There is a different feel to this letter from Paul's earlier one. In the first letter there are many expressions of affection, and Paul uses words like urge, encourage and plead. In this second letter it is authority that is highlighted, as with the use of the word 'command' in verse four ('go on doing the things that we command').

Paul spoke of his authority as an apostle in his first letter (see 2:7), and he can command obedience because his exhortations come from the risen Christ who has commissioned him to teach with authority (see 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 4:2,11). He has already assured them of his affection in his earlier letter. He assumes that they are confident in it.

Through his communion 'in the Lord', Paul is confident that the Thessalonians will follow his directions (compare Galatians 5:10). His prayer is modelled on prayers such as the following: 'O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our ancestors, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you' (1 Chronicles 29:18).

The expression '**love of God**' in verse five includes both the love which God has for them, and the love they are to have among themselves and for others, a love which is itself from God.

Similarly with the expression '**the steadfastness of the Messiah**'. Paul is referring both to Jesus' own steadfastness amid sufferings and trials, and to the share in this virtue which Jesus has given to his disciples.

2Thessalonians 3:6-11

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, to keep away from believers who are insubordinate and undisciplined [ατακτως], and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; for we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.

The community as a whole is living the faith very well (compare 1:3-4). Paul is concerned, however, with the behaviour of some. They are described as ‘**living in idleness**’, ‘**mere busybodies, not doing any work**’ (compare 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12; 5:14).

However, Paul’s calling on the authority given him by Jesus to instruct the community to keep away from these people points to a more serious problem than laziness. There is a link between the undisciplined, insubordinate lives of these people and the whole issue of pseudo-charismatic utterances that are causing excitement concerning the day of the Lord (see 2:2). Are they saying that because the day of the Lord is upon them, they have no need to carry out their ordinary duties, with the result that they are, in fact, abusing the hospitality of the rest of the community?

Paul reminds the community of his teaching and example (compare 1Thessalonians 4:1). As apostles commissioned by the Messiah, he and his companions have the right to expect to be supported by the community (compare 1Corinthians 9:4-14; Luke 10:7), but they were determined not to use this right, and so they worked to support themselves (see 1 Thessalonians 2:9).

The unity of the Christian community was one thing to which Paul was passionately committed. We must not overlook the purpose of this firmness. It is that the offenders may see what they are doing, experience a sense of shame and change their behaviour. Paul insists that those who correct them do not forget that they are correcting members of the Christian community. The correction must be done in a spirit of love. When Paul commands them to work 'quietly' (compare 1Thessalonians 4:11), he seems to be referring to their living now with the Lord and trustfully looking forward to being with him always (see 1Thessalonians 4:17).

2 Thessalonians 3:12-15

Now such persons we command and exhort
in the Lord Jesus the Messiah
to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.
Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.
Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter;
have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed.
Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.

Paul exhorts the Thessalonian community to persist in ‘doing what is right’ (3:13). He uses a compound verb (καλοποιεω) made up of the word ‘to do’ and the word ‘καλος’ (compare Galatians 6:9). This points up an interesting and instructive contrast between Latin and Greek usage. Where Latin speaks of ‘virtue’ (related to the word for ‘man’ and ‘strength’), and of ‘right’ (related to the word for ‘law’), Greek speaks of ‘excellence’ (ἀρετῇ), and of ‘beauty’ (καλος). In Greek usage, and in Paul’s understanding, to ‘do what is right’ is to do what is morally beautiful.

The strength of Paul’s words here and the obvious passion with which he confronts ways of behaving that are destructive of community invite us to take time to examine the quality of life of the various communities to which we belong. Let us do this in the presence of God and asking for the enlightenment of his Spirit.

Do we love enough to at least want to face up to the truth of what is happening in our marriage, our family, our church community, our work-place? We may not be ready to do anything about it; in which case we will have to wait. But waiting can turn into neglect. As disciples of Jesus we are called not to hurt others. But this is not enough: we are called positively to love them. This means that at least we should be on the look out for ways of helping them and ourselves search out the truth and do something about it.

How much better all of us would be if others loved us enough to correct us. How much richer would our communities be if we trusted each other enough to believe that we wanted to do something about the unloving habits into which we slip so easily. We spoke of the 'anger of God' in relation to 1 Thessalonians 1:10. It seems that there is too little loving anger in our world, and in our communities there is too little passionate concern that we live the truth of the gospel.

Let us pray for the grace to be open to being corrected by others. Let us pray for the kind of concern that will cause us to seek out loving ways to help others change for the better. Where we come up against people who are destroying the community, let us pray for the kind of courageous determination commanded by Paul in this letter, and demonstrated by Jesus himself (Matthew 23:1-19).

2 Thessalonians 3:16

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace
at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you.

Paul begins and ends both his letters to the Christians of Thessalonica by wishing them 'peace'. The Jewish term is not concerned with the absence of noise or violence. It means 'fullness in harmony'. It is rather like the experience one has in listening to an orchestra in which every instrument is vibrant with sound, but in perfect harmony with every other instrument. Or one may think of the peace enjoyed in a family in which every member is creative, full of life, and sensitive to every other member. Paul has expressed his delight in them (see 1:3-4), but with reservations (see 3:6-15). In wishing them peace, he is praying that the problems will be resolved and that they may experience the harmony of the Spirit of Jesus.

2 Thessalonians 3:17-18

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.

The grace of our Lord Jesus the Messiah be with all of you.

As in his letter to the Galatians (6:11), he draws attention to his handwriting. The letter itself was written, as was the custom, by a secretary skilled in the craft. The final few words act as a kind of signature. He would have signed his earlier letter, but he did not feel the need to draw attention to the fact. Here he does so, both to assist them in detecting any writings that people might try to pass off as his (see 2:2), and to reassure them concerning the genuineness of his earlier letter. They can easily compare the two signatures.