

A Warning and A Wish

2 Thessalonians 3.14-18

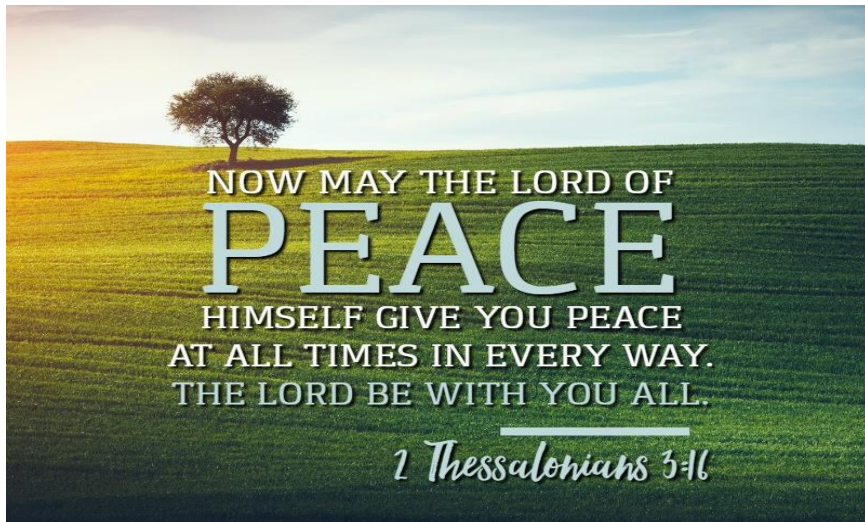
Paul's at the end of his letter to the Thessalonian Christians, but he has two final things to say. One is a warning, the other a wish. But together they reflect Paul's overriding goal for them: Walk worthy!

A Warning: Watch Out for Disobedient Christians (14-15)

- Don't associate with them, so they will be put to shame (14)
- Don't treat them hatefully, but as the brothers they are (15)

A Wish: The Peace of God and the Grace of Christ (16-18)

- Make Uniting Peace Your Goal (16)
- Let Grace Mark All You Do (17-18)

2 Thessalonians 3.14-18

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. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all! I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

This morning we come to the end of Paul's letter to the Christians in Thessalonica. In our review of this epistle over the last six weeks, Paul's purpose in writing has become clear. First, he wanted to correct false teaching: The day of the Lord had not come – they had not missed the Rapture, and the persecution they were facing was not the prophesied time of Great Tribulation. Second, Paul wanted to correct bad behavior: Those believers who were living undisciplined lives needed to get to work, and stop being lazy. Jesus was coming, but until He did, they should live productive lives.

These are both lessons we need to take to heart today. As we see an increase in lawlessness, we look confidently to the coming of the Lord to take us to be with Him. But as we wait, we should be disciplined and work, to provide for our own needs, and to help others in need. From the moment we believed, God has chosen to save us from the time of judgment that is coming on the world. We should reflect that awesome truth in all we do.

But now Paul is ready to end his letter. If you or I were writing a letter, we'd probably just end with a "Sincerely yours." Not Paul. He usually 'signed off' with a word of encouragement and a warm farewell. But a few times, he surprised his readers with a harsh warning.

Take 1 Corinthians, for example. The Corinthian church had a host of problems – divisions, immorality, legalism, and false teachings, to name a few. But when you get to chapter 16, it seems like he's done beating them up. He sends greetings to them from Christians in other churches and tells them to greet one another with a holy kiss – a customary sign of love and unity. Then out of the blue, in 1 Cor. 16.22, he writes this: *If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse be on him. Come, O Lord!* (NIV) Ouch!

His letter to Titus is like this. He's about to ask Titus to come and visit him at Nicopolis, and to help Zenas and Apollos on their way, and that Christians should always engage in good deeds and be fruitful. But first, he writes this: *Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.* (Titus 3.10-11, NKJ)

Even Romans, the greatest of all Paul's epistles, ends up this way. Paul gives a long list of greetings, all of them upbeat and cheerful. But right in the middle, he suddenly writes this: *...my dear brothers and sisters... Watch out for people who cause divisions and upset people's faith by teaching things contrary to what you have been taught. Stay away from them!* (Romans 16.17, NLT)

It's almost as if, out of nowhere, his benign countenance changes. It reminds me of this famous scene [Bilbo gets angry]! You're ready for a hug and a pat on the back, but instead you get a punch in the nose!

While it may seem abrupt, however, these aren't cases of Paul just venting, or pulling a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde! A closer look reveals these warnings are really expressions of Paul's love for believers. Here at the end of Second Thessalonians, we encounter another harsh warning.

Anyone reading Paul's letters to the Thessalonians knows he loves these people. It's unavoidable. He thanks God for them. He is proud of them; they are standing strong in the face of persecution. Christians throughout Macedonia are talking about them. He wants to return and visit them again. And one more thing: He also wants to protect them from spiritual danger: He knows the greatest threat to the church is *not* oppression from the world, but defection from the ranks. Satan's best weapon against Christians is deception and division. So in his closing comments, Paul injects a harsh warning. Living in a day when tolerance and having 'enlightened views' is praised, this warning is especially timely.

These last five verses of 2 Thessalonians have a warning and a wish. Let's look at the warning first.

Warning: Watch Out for Disobedient Christians (14-15)

Right out of the gate in v14, Paul identifies who he is warning us about: *If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter...* The Greek word translated 'obey' there is ὑπακούω (*hupakoúō*) – the root verb (*akouúō*) means to

hear (we get our word *acoustic* from it), but with the *hupó* prefix, it was used technically of a doorkeeper or porter, whose job it was to listen for the door and open it. It came to refer to someone who hears and responds, i.e., obeys. Paul's warning here is directed at those who hear what God's Word says, and choose not to obey it.

When a person gets saved, they don't understand spiritual truths. They need time to mature and grow in their faith. We don't expect a child to understand advanced physics. But when a person has been saved for a few years, hears God's Word taught, but for some reason decides not to obey it, that's a problem.

This was a problem in Thessalonica, and it's a problem today. Church leaders know that what the Bible teaches is the opposite of what our society and even our Supreme Court says. We shouldn't be surprised when the world wallows in sin. That's all they know. But when Christian leaders capitulate and approve what God calls sin, that is a problem. Paul's desire is to keep us from falling into the same trap as them. His warning has two parts.

- Don't associate with them, so they'll be ashamed (14)

First, *take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.* Let's quickly notice three things here: First, *take special note of them* (Gk. σημειῶ, *sēmeiōō*; related to noun meaning "sign"); in other words, identify these individuals. The idea is not to be 'hunting around' for someone who steps out of line, but to be alert to those who are disobeying God.

Second, Paul says *do not associate with him*; 'don't have anything to do with him.' Those in Thessalonica who did not obey Paul's teaching need to feel isolated. Does this seem harsh to you?

We live in a day of tolerance and conformity: Those of us who embrace what Scripture teaches are constantly being told we need to 'lighten up,' 'take it easy,' 'stop being so narrow-minded and intolerant.' The context here is in the local church, however; here we do not compromise with sin. Why not? Because if false teachings or sinful actions are allowed to go unchecked, what happens? The witness of the church to the world is lost. As society unravels, we no longer have a message of light in the darkness.

What is the goal of this? That the disobedient person will be put to shame, or better, "be ashamed of himself." The idea here is that a person will reflect on what he has said or done, be embarrassed by it, and 'change his tune.'

Note: The idea is *not* that we excitedly 'shame others' publicly. There are too many self-righteous prigs in the church today, who act like their spiritual gift is telling others everything they're doing wrong. People who do this just repel those who need to be restored.

- Don't hate them; treat them as Christian brothers (15)

That's why Paul adds a note of restraint in v15: *Don't treat him like an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.* The word translated *enemy* here is ἐχθρός (*echthros*); it means an 'object of hatred,' someone we despise.

Paul says we shouldn't think of them that way: Instead, we should understand what is happening here: A brother in Christ has been seduced by Satan. He is in need of our help, not our condemnation.

It's been said that we Christians 'shoot our wounded' – in other words, when someone sins, we bury them. How do you feel when you hear of a Christian falling into sin? *There goes another Christian I'm better than!?* This is a call to Christians to rescue their brothers.

In Galatians 6.1 Paul summarizes the way we should respond to those who are disobeying God: *Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.*

Let me end with a rhetorical question: Have you ever said or done something you were later ashamed of? What helped to restore you? Maybe it was a brother who gently encouraged you to let God back into your life. Whatever or whoever it was – you be that kind of person for others.

That's Paul's warning. Now what's his wish?

Wish: The Peace of God and the Grace of Christ (16-18)

- Make Uniting Peace Your Goal (16)

Fittingly, Paul's first wish for Christians is that we will be people of peace: *Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. (16).* When the world looks at us, they should see peace.

In John 14.27, Jesus told His disciples: *Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.* In a world filled with hatred and violence, we know the Lord of all, and He knows us. When they're in uproar, we can know peace.

- Let Grace Mark All You Do (17-18)

Then in v18, Paul ends where he started this letter, with grace: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.* Grace, and peace. Just imagine what a contrast we will be to the world as we exude grace and peace!

Earlier this morning we sang lyrics penned by songwriter Chris Tomlin:

*There's a place where mercy reigns, and never dies
There's a place where streams of grace flow deep and wide
Where all the love I've ever found
Comes like a flood, comes flowing down*

That place is the cross, where Jesus died. But when we surrender our lives to Christ, we reflect His peace and grace. As we say farewell to Second Thessalonians, let's claim Paul's closing wish-prayer for ourselves: *May the peace and grace of God mark us in all that we do.*

Digging Deeper

1. Paul's instruction to the believers in Thessalonica about how to treat those who reject his teaching in this epistle is stern. It has two parts: First, *take special note* of them (the Greek σημειῶ, *sēmeiōō* is related to a noun meaning "sign") is to intentionally identify these individuals. Second, *do not associate with him* = "don't have anything to do with him." Those who disobey what Paul has commanded are isolated. We live in a day of tolerance and conformity: How does Paul's prescription sound to you? If false teachings and sinful actions are allowed to go unchecked, what is the result in the church? What happens to the witness of the church to the world? See 1 Cor. 5 and 6 for a case study.
2. The goal of this isolation is that the disobedient person *will be put to shame*, or perhaps better "be ashamed of himself." The idea of the verb is that a person will reflect on what he has said or done, be embarrassed by it, and 'change his tune.' The idea is *not* that we gleefully 'shame others' publicly; this promotes self-righteousness in those doing the shaming, and repels those who need to be restored. What role does the Holy Spirit play in this restoration process? Have you ever said or done something you were later ashamed of? What helped to restore you?
3. Verse 15 is important! Sometimes we 'shoot our wounded' – in other words, when someone sins, we *bury* them. When we hear of a Christian falling into sin, do we feel good because we look better in comparison? What should our attitude be if discipline is required? The Corinthians were too enthusiastic in enforcing discipline, and Paul had to 'call them off' (2 Cor. 2.6-8)! Read Matt. 7.1-5, Gal. 6.1-5, and James 5.19-20.
4. In his closing farewell, written in his own hand (17), Paul ends where he started, with a prayer for peace (16) and grace (18) to mark them as believers (cf. 1.2). What does a church known for 'peace' and 'grace' look like? Is there still room for truth? How do these closing verses show us the way?

Message 7: (3.14-18)

Most commentators connect verses 14-15 with verses 6-13, but for a few reasons, I will view these last five verses as a unit. First, there is a chiasmic structure in verses 6-13 which suggests it is its own unit:

- a Command in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (6a)
- b Problem: Lack of discipline (6b; ἀτάκτως, same as v.11)
- c The Rule (6c; alluded to)
- d The Example: Paul and the apostles (7-9)
- c' The Rule (10; expanded)
- b' Problem: Lack of discipline (11)
- a' Command in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (12-13)

Second, the instruction to “keep away from” (στέλλεσθαι) unruly or undisciplined brothers (6) is ‘echoed’ in the instruction to “not associate with” (μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι) brothers who are disobedient (14), suggesting that this is a new section.

Third, the reference to “instruction (λόγος) in this letter” (v14) seems to incorporate both correcting false teachings regarding the day of the Lord, and confronting undisciplined behavior of some as they wait for the day of the Lord to come.

As in Rom. 16.17 and 1 Cor. 16.22, this closing command is harsh. This needed to be so, since the ramifications of false teaching and undisciplined living were both poisonous to the gospel. The former stole the joyful anticipation of the Rapture from the new believers, and the latter would make Christians, already unpopular in their pagan culture, even less likable than they already were! Therefore, anyone (Christian) who did not obey Paul’s instruction ‘in this letter’ was first to be ‘taken special note of’ (σημειῶ; lit. “marked”) and avoided, with the intended result that they would be ashamed of themselves. The idea is to make the disobedient Christian stand out, be noticed, and be ashamed.

But on the heels of this harsh instruction, Paul mitigates the punishment. Lest some are too enthusiastic in their chastisement, they must “not regard him as an enemy (ἐχθρὸν, an object of

hatred), but admonish him as a brother.” Christians often tend to take too much joy in punishing the sins of others. The goal is not to drive someone away from the church, but draw them back to fellowship with Christ. Verse 16 seems to reflect this goal: It is a wish-prayer for “the Lord of peace” to “continually grant you peace in every circumstance.” Our discipline should not drive a wedge between Christians; it should drive us all back to our Savior.

That this is Paul’s heartfelt wish for the Thessalonian church is affirmed by his taking the pen from his amanuensis (scribe) and signing his own name, or making a distinguishing mark to signify this is authentically from him (cf. 2.2). The customary ending, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all” provides an ‘embrace of grace.’ This, above all, is what is needed in these lawless last days.

- Outline:
1. Discipline for Disobedient Christians (14-15)
 - a. Don’t associate with them, so they will be put to shame (14)
 - b. Don’t treat them hatefully, but as the brothers they are (15)
 2. Make Uniting Peace Your Goal (16)
 3. A Personal Farewell Call to be People of Grace (17-18)