

ORDER IN THE CHURCH

(Order Summary)

Reading: 2 Thessalonians 3: 6-18.

The apostle Paul has covered the big themes of how to make sense of persecution and the Second Coming of Christ, plus the appearance of the man of sin. He has also written to them of the confident prayers he is praying for them.

The issues addressed in vv 6-15 can seem something of an anticlimax. On the one hand, we live with such great themes. Then, on the other hand, there are issues to do with our day-to-day behaviour. Here Paul is addressing the issue of idleness (v11). From his prayer in 2 Thessalonians 2:14 we can see Paul is confident that they will receive his commandments well. From v12 and v14 we can see Paul is confident he will get a good hearing from them. He is not assuming that the people who are being idle are reprobates but is hopeful that they are brethren (v15).

1. Being a burden to others.

If the consideration of v10 is not being observed, it means that someone else is 'paying for all this.' Work is the normal state of affairs. Adam and Eve were set to work in the Garden of Eden. People need work otherwise they might become depressed. Although obviously if we are unwell or suffering some chronic condition, we might not be able to work.

The idea that we should, ideally, work is tied up to the idea that we should not be a burden on other people. Sometimes there are real needs that need addressing and where there is a responsibility we have towards other people, such as in Acts 6:1. People can have proper expectations that they might receive help from us, and we should meet those needs. We can also see in James 1:27 the expectation that believers will help other people in real need. The thought is also there in 1 Timothy 5:3 but we can also see that there are other demands that should not be met (1 Timothy 5: 4, 8 and 16).

In most situations, however, the biblical expectation is as it is expressed in 2 Thessalonians 3:10. We are not to think that the church or anyone else owes us a living. Paul showed by his example that he would not be a burden on the church (1 Thessalonians 2: 6-9; 1 Corinthians 9:15). To refuse to hear this exhortation to work is to walk disorderly (v6, v11). The theme had already been picked up in Paul's first letter to

the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; 5:14). To be disorderly is to be unruly and to be not submitting to the commandments of Scripture.

One of the dangers is that people might then become 'busybodies' (v11). People have time on their hands if they are not working and spend that time in gossip, and idle speculation about, for example, the Second Coming. People might think that are being spiritual in their talk but are often found criticising and censuring other people. This behaviour is described in 1 Timothy 5:13. Such people are unproductive.

This is not a call for overworked people to be even more overworked. Sometimes, while claiming to be serving the church, we end up neglecting our families, our own health or our own spiritual wellbeing.

2. Dealing with people in the church.

Paul also has instruction about how the church is to respond to people who are disorderly. In this regard we have to accept that every situation is different, and people are not all the same. Likewise, the responses of the church are not always identical. Paul is not advocating that anyone at this stage be excommunicated from the church.

There are varieties of offence in the life of the local church. Some offences are of a more private nature between different individuals. We imagine that this was the nature of the difficulty experienced between Euodia and Syntyche in the church in Philippi. It might also be the kind of dispute that arose between Paul and Barnabas. Except it is the way of such offences to overspill and begin to affect other people, as it had evidently done in the church in Philippi. Others may need to intervene to help if there is strain and tension in the air.

Other offences are against the church and not just against one person. The situation that Paul is addressing in Thessalonica falls into this category. By being busybodies and not hard-working, these people were stealing time and money from other people and also from the Lord. They were therefore to receive public censure and be 'noted'. The shame of the church's disapproval of their behaviour was to shame them into repentance. The offence was not a 'capital one' but it could not be overlooked. The offence was against all the church because all the church could observe the behaviour of the people who were not working. People in the church were instructed not to mix with the offending people and to put some distance between them. The church's behaviour was to show that there was an outstanding issue and that the behaviour of these people was not approved of. This does not amount to excommunication or refusing to talk to the people involved. And it is difficult to get the balance right between being too severe or too generous. It is all the more difficult because we also love the people involved and desire the best outcome for them.

If, however, those who are walking in a disorderly way refuse to hear the admonition, but instead become argumentative and self-justifying, this could then move things towards discipline along the lines described in Titus 3:10.

Other situations are more serious and require firmer action. This is the situation in 1 Corinthians 5 where there is serious sexual sin and, neither the person committing the sin, nor the church are feeling ashamed and contrite. Paul urges the believers there to get the right perspective on the sin and not to feel proud about their liberal views but take strong action (1 Corinthians 5:11). If the person involved in the sin shows no contrition and no desire to put the matter right, then people in the church are to keep their distance and not to eat with the person. This is to show that there is no shared life together and no point of spiritual connection. Such action would be occasioned by the person committing sexual immorality, theft, deceit, lying, or being drunken, for example. To such people, the message is that they have chosen to walk in a way that is unacceptable.

In these various situations, the desire is that the person should repent of their sin. Unfortunately, if the person resorts to blaming others, self-justification or claiming 'victim status', these are not encouraging signs. People who are committing a wrong can appear self-righteous and insistent that they have done no wrong. Firm resolve has to be shown in response to these behaviours, otherwise the person is not being encouraged to repent.

Finally, Paul finishes his letter briefly and confidently looks to the Lord to grant to the church His peace, grace and presence.