

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

Stay the Course 2 Thessalonians 3:13-18

Introduction

Today we reach the last words of Paul's second epistle to the Thessalonian church. We have learned much from the apostle's instruction to this exemplary young church. They faced persecution from the beginning but held firm. They not only survived the attacks, but were thriving in a hostile world. Their faith under fire held firm.

The dangers they faced were not only from persecution, but from false teachers and disobedient brothers. The same is true today. And the apostolic strategies for facing these challenges still work today.

We could sum up Paul's final words to these dear believers he loves with this command: "Stay the course." That was Paul's desire for them. That is our prayer for us.

So what makes staying the course possible? We will explore that this morning from Paul's words in 2 Thessalonians 3:13-18.

13 As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. **14** If anyone does not obey what

we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵ Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

¹⁶ Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all. ¹⁷ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. ¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

1. Perseverance (13)
2. Accountability (14-15)
3. Peace (16)
4. Discernment (17)
5. Grace (18)

1. Perseverance (13)

As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

As for you, brothers—in contrast to those who are living idle lives out of line with the apostles' commands and example

Do not grow weary in doing good—don't faint, don't lose heart, don't lose courage in doing good—practicing what is beneficial and appropriate

There are two common synonyms the NT uses for good works. One leans into the moral

rightness of doing good. The other leans toward the benefit of doing good. The word Paul uses here stresses the beneficial nature of doing what's right.

Remember that *every sin is not only contrary to the moral standards of God but also harmful to others and to ourselves*. Keeping that reality in mind helps us fight temptation to do wrong and gather courage to do right.

Doing what is morally right and beneficial is not always easy. It often calls for self-denial and persevering faith. And when doing good involves confronting a brother or sister who is living openly contrary to gospel commands, it is easy to shrink from doing what true love for God and for that individual calls us to do.

It takes work and self-denial to develop the relational capital we draw on when we exercise healthy church discipline. The process is usually messy and even complicated in working through the life factors that contributed to the sinful practice.

Even brothers and sisters that eventually come around often respond at first in hurtful ways to those who are trying to help. If the sinning individual does not repent and is therefore not restored, he or she nearly always attacks without mercy those who sacrificed the most to help them turn.

No wonder, then, that Paul says, "Don't lose courage in doing good. Don't grow weary in doing what will typically drain your strength when you engage in it."

This is but one part of living for the glory of God and the good of others. *Every form of good works we are called to practice takes focus and energy and time. No wonder the NT repeatedly calls us to persevere.* Doing so is the mark of our having been born again. The life of God at work in our lives through the indwelling Holy Spirit energizes our obedience to God and our self-sacrificing love toward others. If God were not at work in us, we could not sustain living this way.

If we feel it's too big a sacrifice to serve God this way, we need to keep in mind that every one of us will spend our lives doing something, good or bad. *Serving self and Satan will cost you, too. It might seem the easier route at first, but it is the poisonous path of self-destruction and sorrow. You might as well spend your strength and time doing what is good and eternal in its value.*

Christ promises you will not lose your reward for doing so. He is not a stingy Master. His love for you is steadfast and strong, and He knows the smallest detail of whatever you do out of love for Him and love for others.

Galatians 6:7-9

⁷ Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. ⁸ For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. ⁹ And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

Applications

- In what areas of doing good are you growing weary and losing heart?
- In what ways you can strengthen yourself to persevere?
- What brothers or sisters can you bring into your life to help you do so?

2. Accountability (14-15)

¹⁴ If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵ Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

Paul returns to the area of concern he has addressed in this chapter. Many believe that this issue is what prompted his writing this second letter to the church in Thessalonica so soon after writing his first letter to them. You recall that he talked about this very issue in chapter 4 of that first letter. This is follow-up.

The church is a family that welcomes everyone who is trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ to live together in unity serving the Lord. But for any family to be healthy, there has to be accountability. It is a community of love, but that love calls for behavior consistent with it. And when we're talking about the family of God, we don't turn a blind eye to a family member who is behaving in a way that is rebellious to God, harmful to others, and destructive to self.

What are we to do when someone refuses to obey what the apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ have commanded believers to do?

First, take note of that person.

Pay attention; don't pretend it doesn't matter. Ignoring or excusing such a person conveys the idea that the authority of Christ doesn't matter and that this individual at risk who professes to follow Christ doesn't matter.

Second, have nothing to do with him.

If your interaction and relationship with this brother or sister in flagrant sin continues on as normal, you become party to their sin. You are letting sin take hold in the family. Doing so is not good for the sinning person. Nor is it good for the rest of the body. In time, such gospel-denying living will spread like gangrene. It misrepresents the gospel and its

impact on people. The light becomes darkness. The church relinquishes its reason for existence in the world—to shine light in the darkness, not become part of the darkness.

What's the immediate purpose and effect of taking this course of action?

That he may be ashamed.

Do those words surprise you? Our psychologized culture is very sensitive to doing anything that brings shame to people, even when they are practicing shameful things. But when I'm doing wrong, my being ashamed for doing so is important. It's a mark of Holy Spirit conviction that points me to repentance and restoration. *Trying to neutralize the shame of sinful behavior hardens my heart to sinful behavior and leads to justifying it, even celebrating it, and eventually counting confrontation of it as evil. Evil becomes good, and good becomes evil.*

Christian shame and sorrow over sin leads us to repentance, restoration, and life. Healthy shame produced by fellow Christians' holding us accountable and refusing to pretend our open sinning doesn't matter points us to a remedy. It does not leave us hopeless and helpless. It does not ridicule and berate the sinner. Having nothing to do with this brother is calculated to awaken his desire to be a healthy part of the body again by getting

right with God and living in accord with that reconciliation. This is exactly what verse 15 underscores:

2 Thessalonians 3:15

Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

Having nothing to do with him is not the whole strategy. We must also warn him, that is put him in mind. Help him think straight about how he's living.

In doing so you are treating him as a brother, a beloved family member.

When kids are misbehaving, it's their own parents who step up to deal with them. We don't have the same responsibility toward the children of other parents. We understand intuitively that a loving family ought to take care of its own not just in instruction but in discipline. Same thing with the body of Christ. We may decry the evil of the age, but our job is not to police those outside the church. We are responsible for those inside the church family.

Paul states this principle clearly in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the

world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

Sometimes we get this backwards. We spend too much time fretting and fuming over the sins of those who don't know Jesus. All they're demonstrating is that they need gospel rescue.

But when a brother behaves wickedly like an unbeliever, I'm not supposed to berate him as if he were an enemy, I'm supposed to come alongside and put him in mind. That's treating him with the love a brother deserves.

Ignoring his sinful lifestyle is not showing him love. It's actually conveying I don't value him. Hatred is not always expressed with slander and violence. Sometimes it's expressed with treating the person as if he doesn't matter or even exist. We call it being “passive aggressive.” You mistreat a person by erasing that person from your attention. Husbands who aren't living with their wives in an understanding way and valuing her as the

weaker vessel will sometimes mistreat her by just ignoring her, cutting her off from his life. It's very hurtful.

So when we exercise the church discipline of having nothing to do with a brother sinning against gospel commands, the way we do so is really important. It's with a heart and effort to warn him as brother, not treat him as an enemy. That takes prayerful wisdom and loving courage.

Applications

- What unrepentant brother or sister do you need to break fellowship with in order to move him or her toward repentance?
- What sinning brother or sister are you treating as an enemy rather than warning as a brother or sister?

3. Peace (16)

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

The Lord is the divine Source of peace, the shalom that pervades the church family and the life of the individual believer. Such peace is pearl of great price especially in the context of the challenges the Thessalonian believers faced from their persecuting enemies on the outside and their disobedient brothers on the

inside. Paul prays that the Lord will give them peace at all times and in every way. Pervasive peace.

Jesus the Messiah is the Prince of Peace, whose kingdom makes all things right. God Himself brings peace in our conflicts and peace to our fears.

Colossians 3:12-15

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.

Philippians 4:5-7

⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

At the end of 2 Thessalonians 3:16 Paul adds, “May the Lord be will you all.”

It is His ruling presence that brings peace to our hearts and to our relationships. Whenever we are keenly aware that “The Lord is at hand”—that He is near, peace guards our hearts and heals our relationships.

Application

- Where are you lacking peace, and how can the Lord’s presence and power help you find it?
- Are there ways you are disrupting the peace in your relationships, and how can you correct that behavior?

4. Discernment (17)

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

This seems almost a throwaway detail, a housekeeping matter, until we remember that it was a fake letter supposedly from Paul that had caused some believers to fear the day of the Lord had already come.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-2

¹ Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming

to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

It was absolutely essential to the health of the believers in Thessalonica to treat as authoritative only genuine apostolic teaching, nothing else that pretends to be so. For us to stay the course it is critical for us to test the teaching we receive by the apostles' teaching now preserved for us in the NT canon of Scripture. We must reject everything that contradicts or redefines that teaching as another gospel, powerless to save and deadly to our spiritual health. We cannot stay the course if we do not exercise this critical discernment in what we receive as authoritative.

John Stott puts it this way in his commentary on 2 Thessalonians 3:

"There is nobody in the church who has an authority which even remotely resembles that of the apostles of Christ; nor has there been since the last apostle died. . . . How, then, can we submit to apostolic authority today? Only by submitting to the New Testament. For the authority of the apostles (which is the authority of Christ) is undiminished. . . . For if Christ spoke through them and they spoke in the name of Christ, to disagree with their teaching is to disagree with him. The well-being of the church, in the present century as in the first, depends on our listening to Jesus

Christ and obeying him as his word comes to us through his apostles in the New Testament.” (163-164)

Today as in the past there is great pressure to syncretize biblical teaching with the so-called wisdom of the age. It invariably leads to diminishing the authority of Scripture and the health of the church. The deconstruction and defection so common in our day comes from the appalling lack of discernment as to what is truth and what is not. It appears to be rooted in a love for the world’s approval that supersedes loyalty to Christ and His authoritative word handed down to us by His apostles. Such a course is deadly and damning.

Applications

- In what areas are you tempted to ignore or explain away clear Scriptural teaching?
- What threatens to outrank your love and loyalty to Christ and His teaching through the apostles?
- In what ways do you test what you read and hear by apostolic teaching?

5. Grace (18)

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

Grace—favor, goodness, kindness, beauty we don't deserve and could not earn. Where it not for the unmerited favor poured out on us through the Lord Jesus Christ, we could not stay the course. His grace has rescued us. His grace strengthens us. His grace keeps us and protects us. His grace will bring us safely home.

He is the Lord of all. He is the God-man Savior—that what His name Jesus conveys—Yahweh saves. And He is the long-promised Messiah, the anointed King of the everlasting kingdom. He has made us citizens of His kingdom, having transferred us from the kingdom of darkness and made us children of light.

Be with you all—His amazing, astonishing grace is for every believer—man, woman, boy, girl. We are favored people. And that is why we survive and thrive in a hostile world, though our faith is under fire. The Lord Jesus Christ will not lose even one of us who belong to Him.

*His grace has led me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

John Newton

Applications

- How can knowing that the grace of Christ is with you help you stay the course in living for Jesus and doing good toward others?

- How does knowing His grace is on all true believers shape your attitudes and expectations?

Conclusion

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Closing Song: Jesus, Your Name

Summary of Applications

- In what areas of doing good are you growing weary and losing heart?
- In what ways you can strengthen yourself to persevere?
- What brothers or sisters can you bring into your life to help you do so?
- What unrepentant brother or sister do you need to break fellowship with in order to move him or her toward repentance?
- What sinning brother or sister are you treating as an enemy rather than warning as a brother or sister?
- Where are you lacking peace, and how can the Lord's presence and power help you find it?

- Are there ways you are disrupting the peace in your relationships, and how can you correct that behavior?
- In what areas are you tempted to ignore or explain away clear Scriptural teaching?
- What threatens to outrank your love and loyalty to Christ and His teaching through the apostles?
- In what ways do you test what you read and hear by apostolic teaching?
- How can knowing that the grace of Christ is with you help you stay the course in living for Jesus and doing good toward others?
- How does knowing His grace is on all true believers shape your attitudes and expectations?

Additional Discussion Question

- When is shame harmful, and when is it helpful?