

Study 12: Hope in Work--Leader Guide

Introduction

Throughout Paul's ministry he needed brothers and fellow ministers to assist in spreading the Gospel, but despite serious hardships, he never depended on others for his living. In fact at times he took on a heavy workload of manual labor in addition to his ministry in order to avoid being a burden to any fellow Christian. Paul desired for these traits to be a model for new converts to imitate.

Through our work we earn a living to provide for ourselves and our family and to also give generously to the Church and those who are truly needy. In this lesson, we learn that Paul wants us to discern those who are truly needy from those who are idle. The distinction is important to make. God desires each of us to earn our keep and to not be a burden on others. We learn that being God's disciple will bring us in contact with many people who could potentially become a burden on us and our message. We are taught not to be discouraged or taken advantage of. Ultimately Paul leaves us with a desire that God be with us and that he grant us His peace and His mercy at all times and in all places. Armed with these tools and a faith built on a firm foundation, the Thessalonians had everything they needed to successfully spread God's Word and minister to the new converts in their community. And we have that promise as well.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:1-12

3 Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, ² and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. ³ But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. ⁴ And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. ⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

⁶ Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. ⁹ It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. ¹¹ For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹² Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

Discussion

1. Paul asks that the Thessalonians pray for Paul and his ministry so that the word of the Lord may speed ahead, spread, and be honored. Paul was focused on his mission which was to spread the Word of God and the Gospel as far as it could possibly go. He would have been amazed to see after his death how it spread throughout the Roman Empire

and ultimately around the world. **Can you relate to Paul's mission? Have we seen the Gospel spreading in a dynamic and life-altering way during our lifetime? Perhaps you have a similar story in your work or your community where you can relate? What does it feel like to heed God's call and see it bear fruit?**

-During our own lifetime, we have seen an explosion in Christianity in the continent of Africa

-You might want to show these videos to your group to demonstrate how attractive the Gospel has been to remote parts of the world through out the past two millennia:

[https://www.businessinsider.com/how-christianity-spread-around-world-
animated-map-2015-7](https://www.businessinsider.com/how-christianity-spread-around-world-animated-map-2015-7)

<https://vimeo.com/113801439>

-The answers to the question on whether people can relate will vary depending on each person's individual experience and their ability to relate to this.

-If people are reluctant to share or do not think they have much to offer, encourage them to think about service projects they might have engaged in or conversations they have had with non-believers about their faith

2. But Paul anticipates that he will encounter resistance from wicked and evil men. **What kind of people do you think Paul was referring to here? What kind of resistance do we encounter in promoting God's Word and enacting God's will today in our society? Based on Paul's message here should we persist in executing God's will or cower in the face of this resistance? What promise does Paul provide here about the resistance we will face?**

-The end of verse 2 provides a clue as to what Paul is concerned about here; he is referring to people who do not have faith

-It is clear that not all people who are without faith are hostile to the spread of the Gospel, yet some who are evil and wicked are hostile to it

-Today we might encounter those who resent our faith or mistakenly believe that Christians are closed-minded, judgmental, or crazy

-God will protect us and deliver us from our persecutors; We can have confidence that although we will face resistance, God will guide us and we are doing the right thing

-Paul wants God to deliver him from such men or change their hearts to be reasonable and Godly men; we should desire the same while answering our call to God

Paul warns us about others we might encounter in our walk who do not conform to the pattern of living and teaching that Paul provided to the Thessalonians. In verses 6-12 he singles out those people who are idle. These are people who purposely choose not to work and therefore rely on others for their basic necessities. Furthermore some of these individuals act like busybodies engaging in the business of others, thereby meddling in others affairs, but not contributing anything distinct or valuable to society and earn their own living.

3. Can you relate to the people Paul singles out in verses 6-12? Have you at times fallen into idleness and become a burden on others? If so, how did you realize that this behavior was not helpful and get away from that behavior? Are there areas in your life right now where you are idle and depending on others to do things that you should be doing yourself? Conversely, have you enabled others who were idle? How did it feel to be trapped in this situation and how did you respond when you realized it was not healthy?

-This response will vary depending on the individual experiences that people have had and how they can relate

-This question might be sensitive to some people who are currently idle or who are enabling others who are idle; the question is purposely provocative to encourage self-reflection

-If people are reluctant to share, you should relay a situation of your own that people might be able to relate to

-Have people reflect on the volunteer activities they engage in or projects in their workplace or people we see throughout our community

-A real-world example we can all relate to is to reflect on a homeless person we see on a streetcorner panhandling; is it better to offer that person a few dollars and drive off or to escort that person to a local shelter where social workers there can help the homeless person learn job skills, learn how to balance a budget, help them deal with addictions they might have in their life, and potentially introduce them to God's forgiveness (if they are open to learning a different way to live)?

4. Do you think this instruction in verse 6 conflicts with Jesus' instruction to care for the poor? Why or why not?

-Its important to point out here that this instruction does not conflict with Jesus' instruction, although on its surface it might seem that way

-Paul is focused on people who are capable of working, but refuse to work and persist in idleness over a period of time as part of the lifestyle rather than only engaging in it temporarily, which is different than people who are poor due to a mental/physical illness or who for whatever reason cannot earn enough to sustain basic needs

-Sometimes it is easy to mistake these two groups of people and the distinction between them is not always clear to discern in practice

-Yet, that is what Paul is instructing us to do here, we should try to discern whether someone is truly in need or if they are simply choosing to be dependent on others for their livelihood

-Paul might be referring to Thessalonians who have gone idle because they are awaiting the Second Coming or he might simply be referring to lazy Thessalonians who are capable, but refuse work; it is not clear which he is

referring to, but it is clear that this behavior is not consistent with the tradition of earning one's keep that Paul lays out through his letters

5. Why do you think that God cares so much about work, if we are capable of working? Why does He want us to avoid being idle if we are able to work? What impact could these people have on Paul's mission or the mission of faithful Thessalonian ministers and missionaries in Thessalonica?

-Idleness lays the seeds of sinfulness towards God and others

-It is manipulative to depend on others for things that we can do and should do ourselves

-It is also against God's plan for our life

-God intends for us to give all we have to our chosen vocation; he has blessed us with spiritual gifts that we can and should apply with energy and enthusiasm to make this world a better place, serve others, and potentially witness to others

-Like those who resist the spread of the Gospel, those who are idle and depend on self-sufficient Christians become an anchor on their mission to serve God and spread the Gospel; therefore they can limit the effectiveness of that mission

6. Have you ever had to withdraw from someone who was manipulating you or taking advantage of you? What happened when you withdrew your support from them? Why do you think that Paul wants us to withdraw our support from those people here?

-The answer to this will vary depending on people's individual circumstances

-Often times there is a wide range of reactions when we withdraw from enabling someone who refuses to take care of themselves; they could react with anger or sadness; often times they might just leach onto someone else who can fill the role we once filled

-In the case of addictions, people might slip deeper into their addiction by feeling more isolated, which can be difficult to experience, especially for loved ones of the addicted

-Yet it is important to remember that it is not our place to save someone who refuses to save themselves; sometimes someone needs to hit rock bottom before they realize how harmful their behavior is to themselves and others; by enabling them we only let that process drag out; we can love them and support them when they are ready to listen, but we can do that without enabling the destructive behavior

-Paul likely intends here to turn these people to God and expedite the process of them realizing that their behavior is harmful; it also frees up Paul and his missionaries to continue to minister to people who are willing to work and take responsibility for their lives

Read 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.

Discussion

Paul begins his benediction to the Thessalonians by telling them to not grow weary in doing good. Few things are more wearying than seeing others take advantage of Christian generosity, so Paul is offering encouragement to Christ's followers to persevere in their mission. He is encouraging them to not be distracted or discouraged from spreading the Gospel to those in their community who can benefit greatly from it.

In verse 14, Paul identifies a third group to be aware of and to withdraw from and these are people who have heard Paul's instructions, but refuse to obey it. This group is different than the previous two groups in that they are not actively resisting the spread of the Gospel, nor are they necessarily idle, but they are not obeying Paul's instructions, which could encourage other followers to disobey Paul's instructions as well.

7. In verses 15 Paul clarifies what he means by withdrawing from this group of people. Paul is very specific that we are not to treat these people as an enemy of the church, but instead warn them like they are a brother. In other words, Paul is teaching the Thessalonians to hold each other accountable. **Have you ever had to hold a fellow Christian accountable and if so what was your intention? How does the community of the church strengthen itself through holding others accountable and encouraging those who are struggling to keep the faith?**

- Through accountability we keep the community of Christ focused on God's Word and instruction

- Paul's instruction is not to shame people who pull away from the faith or to excommunicate them as an enemy of the church

- Instead Paul's intention is to show mercy to those and treat them as brothers, warning them of where they are falling short

- This is not easy for us to do and largely depends on whether the other person is willing to hear the message and open themselves to God's message of hope and repentance

- Yet, when done well, it will draw those people back into the church and serve as an example to strengthen the community of faith by ensuring that false messages and teachings do not adulterate God's holy Word or the community following it

Paul has spent most of this chapter warning the Thessalonians about three types of people and how to deal with them: 1) people who will actively resist their ministry to spread the Gospel, 2) people who are lazy and refuse to work thereby becoming a burden on Thessalonian believers, and 3) people who hear the good Word but refuse to obey.

Now at the end of the letter he implores the Lord to give the Thessalonians peace at all times and to be with them and their ministry. Paul recognizes the difficulties that lay ahead for the Thessalonians with these warnings and ends the letter with the greatest hope that could be offered to assist the Thessalonians against these challenges and their ongoing ministry. He offers them God's peace in verse 16 and His grace in verse 18.

8. Paul doesn't ask God to send his angel or his minister to provide the Thessalonians God's peace. Nor does he only implore God's peace and grace at a specific time or place. Instead he offers God's grace and peace to them at all times directly from God Himself. **How does God's peace and grace brought to you by God Himself at all times and in all places give you hope as a Christian? What does it feel like to have a personal relationship with God and to know that he wants to grant us his peace and grace?**

-Christianity is distinct from most other major religions in the world in that we have a personal relationship with God the Father; he desires a personal relationship with us, not through an intermediary or a minister acting on our behalf

-Furthermore, God desires to be with us at all times and in all places

-We are sanctified and blessed to have a God who loves us so much

-Sometimes we take this for granted, but we should try to understand how special and unique this is among other world religions

-God loves us when we feel alone and he humbles us when we get overconfident when things are going right and we feel well-loved

-Therefore, we have gratitude for God and all the blessings he bestows on us

-We should also go into the world with courage and no fear since God is with us everywhere we go at all times; this will give us confidence and faith in being honest and open about our faith and being disciples of God

9. There is one key word Paul includes in both verses 16 and 18, which is important to emphasize. Paul asks that the Lord be with you **all** in verse 16 and that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you **all** in verse 18. **Who do you think Paul is referring to when he refers to you all? Do you think this includes those Thessalonians he was rebuking and correcting in other parts of chapter 3? If so, what does this reveal about God the Father, His mercy, and His grace? Ultimately, how should we then pray for and minister to those whom Paul rebukes and corrects?**

-God's grace and presence is for all the Thessalonians, including those who Paul rebuked and corrected in other parts of Chapter 3

-Although we are called to withdraw from some of these people so that they might not poison or adulterate the Thessalonian ministry, we need to also recognize that these people are children of God, just like us and God desires to be with them as well

-Therefore, we should also deeply desire that they can partake in the same peace and grace we regularly enjoy

-We should strive to reflect God's love and grace to these individuals and to be open to welcoming them into the community if they make progress in reconnecting with God and obeying his commands

10. How can we best apply these lessons to our group and our community? How can we ensure this group is a place where God's presence, His peace, and his mercy endures at all times? How can we spread God's presence, peace, and mercy beyond the group into the communities we live and work in?

Closing/application

God blesses us all with spiritual gifts that He intends for us to apply to our respective vocations. Ultimately God desires that we earn our own keep, we provide for ourselves and our families, and we give generously to our church and our community. The only way we can do these things is by working hard and not being idle. As disciples of Christ we will inevitably encounter those who choose not to work or to purposely be a burden on Christians who have the means and motivation to provide for their own. Paul implores us to not enable these people and also do not let them discourage us from our mission. We are to withdraw from them, but not treat them as an enemy of the church. We hope and pray that they can learn the error of their way and can find Christ through learning to work hard and provide for themselves. Whether they realize their fault or not, we are told to treat them as brothers and to reflect God's peace and grace to all.

God desires all his children to have His peace, His presence, and His grace at all times and in all places, despite our circumstances. Therefore we have confidence engaging with our brothers in Christ and in our communities at work and home. We should feel free to be ambassadors in Christ to all around us, knowing that God is with us and with Him all things are possible.

References:

EnduringWord.com, 2018, "2 Thessalonians3 - Guidance for Church Life," Bible commentary, available online: <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/2-thessalonians-3/> (20 February 2021).