

This morning wraps up this three-Sunday series where we have been in Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians. And this last chapter ties together the significant things that he he’s written in the first 2/3 of the letter. So, we’re going to dive right in, starting with the **first 5 verses** of 2 Thessalonians chapter 3....

So: **With this phrase, “As for other matters...” he transitions to something new: a couple of prayer requests.** First is that people without faith in Jesus would honor the gospel and receive it, just as the Thessalonians did. Here at Rose Hill, each of us is praying for 5 people in our spheres of influence – like at work, or school, or in our neighborhood. And the prayers, ultimately, are that we’d be able to share the gospel with these people both in word and actions and lead them toward Jesus; that the gospel message would be honored. Those are gospel-centered prayers similar to what Paul asks prayer for here.

And second, he also asks for prayers for “deliverance from wicked and evil people for not everyone has faith.” This is less about his personal safety and more about the gospel message not being shackled by those who are putting up opposition to the good news. So, both requests are about the gospel and its receptivity in people’s lives.

**Then in verse three he says, “But the Lord is faithful...” and it’s not only a true statement about his own situation, but also about theirs as well.** Paul is reminding them that God will be faithful in their situation as well his own. They can trust God in the midst of their situation just as he does in the midst of his, because God is faithful. And as we’ve seen in this letter, and also in his first letter to them, we know their situation was difficult. And then he gives them a word of encouragement in verses four and five about their work in the Lord and the Lord’s leading in their lives. Now at that point, you almost get the feeling it could be the end of the letter. It feels like a benediction there in verse 5, “May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance.”

But then, as often happens in his letters, Paul continues on. And he gets back to the reason for why he wrote the letter to begin with: addressing the divisions in the church based on errant theology and errant behavior. Let's continue reading the rest of today's passage, **verses 6-18**.

So, what's the bad behavior? **In verses 6, 11, and 14 we see that there are some in the church who are idle, disruptive, and aren't following the teachings of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.** At the root of this seems to be a false belief (bad theology) that they have about the second coming of Jesus – that he's returning any day. This is why Paul reiterates to them in earlier this letter what he'd taught them about Jesus' second coming when he was with them, and all the things that would happen *before* Jesus returns. But these people who have a misunderstanding of Jesus' return believe he's coming any day, and so are choosing not to work, they're living idle lives, are a burden to others, and it's all very disruptive in the life of the church. It's not a stretch to imagine them trying to teach and persuade others to follow them in this belief, which would be really disruptive and counterproductive.

The word in verse 6 and verse 11 that is translated "disruptive" is the Greek word "ataktos". Paul uses it in his first letter to them as well. **"Ataktos" is a military term used to describe a soldier who steps out of the ranks.** It is used more broadly to refer to anyone or anything that is out of place, and portrays intentional idleness, or what we would call "loafing" or "goofing off." In verse 11 he calls them, "busybodies." So, these people are doing stuff, but it isn't productive. Their behavior is distracting and disruptive to the mission of the church.

So, what is the solution to this situation? There are really three things. The first two are aimed at those with the bad behavior. **The first part of the solution is the correcting of their theology about Jesus' return, which impacts the second part of the solutions: behave like a disciple of Jesus.** The theology is at the root, because their misguided theology is what's leading to their bad behavior.

We see misguided theology leading to bad behavior all the time, even today. Take, for instance, the Bible's teaching that "God is love." Some people have a theology that emphasizes God's grace and forgiveness to the point of forgetting that truth matters and our own holy living matters. And so, to take one example, you end up with Christians who have a very permissive attitude and behavior in regard to sex and marriage. The thinking is: "Well, God will forgive me...God is love...God is all grace." It's an incomplete understanding and theology of the love of God.

And then on the other side of the coin you get Christians who are all about the truth and holiness and God's righteous judgement of sin, and they tend to forget that they are also sinners saved by God's grace. It's another incomplete understanding of the love of God. So, in that theological extreme, you end up with Christians whose behavior comes out as judgmental and hateful toward other people because they expect and demand Christian behavior from people who don't know Jesus. That's crazy.

So, Paul wants them to have *right theology* that leads to *right behavior*. Right living is rooted in a right understanding of and right relationship with God. And God wants this for us, today, as well. We want to get our theology right, not just on the second coming of Jesus, but other stuff, too, and then get our behavior lined up with our theology. Not only does he address their theology throughout this letter, Paul also reminds them of his own example of right Christian behavior in verses 7-9 of how he and his companions lived among them as a model for all of them to aspire to – they weren't lazy busybodies. He's not boasting; it's just an example from his and his ministry companions' lives. He wants these theologically errant busybodies to be motivated by right theology to live rightly. So those are the first two parts of the solution, addressed to the busybodies: correcting their theology and behavior.

And then there's a third part of the solution, and this is directed at the believers who are frustrated by the bad behavior of the others. They have a part to play well. **Paul says they should "keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive...and not associate with them" (verses 6 and 14).** The desired outcome is that the people with bad behavior will feel

“ashamed” (v. 14) and therefore be further motivated to correct their behavior.

Now, this last piece about not associating with these busybodies sounds judgmental/unloving, which I believe Scripture teaches is one of the things we want to stay away from. So, Paul’s counsel about how to separate from these other folks is hard for us to grasp, because it doesn’t feel very loving or unifying. But there are two things we need to remember about this.

**First, love is not infinite toleration of unacceptable behavior; unity doesn’t come from infinite tolerance of bad beliefs and behavior, so separation isn’t unloving.** If love were simply infinite tolerance, then Jesus would never have walked the face of the earth and become the once for all sacrifice on the cross. If love were tolerance, sin and bad behavior wouldn’t be a big deal to God – he wouldn’t judge it. God would just “tolerate” it. But God doesn’t do that. He loves us too much to just tolerate it and let us go on living in sin and bad behavior and wrong beliefs.

Similarly, we see Paul saying that remaining together, tolerating this unacceptable theology and bad behavior is not acceptable. It’s not unifying, and it undermines the message of the gospel. It undermines the witness of the Church about the grace and the truth of Jesus. So, he tells them to get some distance from these busybodies with bad theology about Jesus’ second coming.

But there’s a warning to them about how they do this. So: **Second, Paul tells them to regard the busybodies not as an enemy, but “warn them as you would a fellow believer” (verse 15).** More literally, “as a brother.” And so, when Paul writes, “warn them as you would a brother” or “warn them as you would a fellow believer” he’s reminding them: don’t forget, these *are* still your brothers and sisters in Christ, even if their theology is out of whack and even if they aren’t behaving like Jesus-followers. They’re not the enemy.”

This lesson is learned in a lot of relationships, but particularly in a marriage. Anyone who’s been married for...a day knows that you need to remind yourself every now and then that your spouse is not the enemy. I suspect that

every morning Gwen starts her day by saying to herself: “Brian is not the enemy; Brian is not the enemy...” So, Paul is essentially saying, “even though I’m counseling you to have some boundaries with them, to separate from them for a bit...you want to handle that in such a way that they know they are loved, and that you want them on your team once they get straightened out with their theology and their behavior. They are not the enemy. They are humans, like you.”

This is the “grace” side of love. God is love, Jesus is God come to us in flesh, and the gospel of John tells us that Jesus came full of grace and truth. Grace and truth are the two sides of love. The hard truth is, some separation was needed by these two groups in the church; but it needs to be carried out with grace. That’s what Paul is saying in all of this, and we Christians today would be a lot more impactful on our world with the gospel message if we remembered both parts of love: the grace, and the truth. It’s easy to overemphasize one part or the other...to almost forget about one part or the other.

As expected, Jesus models this third way for us, and invites us to follow him on it. For instance, in John 8, Jesus addresses a group of religious leaders who wanted to stone a woman for her adultery (they didn’t bring the guy...that’s another sermon), and he tells them, “Whoever is without sin, go ahead and throw your stone.” They all end up walking away without throwing a single rock. Jesus asks her, “Who’s left to condemn you?” “No one,” she says. And Jesus responds, “Then neither do I condemn you.” And a lot of people say, “See, Jesus was all about love and grace. No condemnation, no judgment.” But many people forget, or don’t know, that he then says to her, “Go and leave your life of sin.” The way it’s put, “leave your life of sin” this adultery probably wasn’t just a one-time thing for her – she’s likely a prostitute. So, Jesus does not tolerate the sin. But he treats her like a sister – with love and respect. This is how we are to love others with whom we have disagreements.

So, what we see in this passage and really throughout this letter, is two things. First: **Having theology that squares up with Jesus is foundational.** No one is perfect in their theology, and our theological convictions – and

they are *convictions* rooted in Scripture...but they still need to be held with humility. So, within our church, and within our denomination, we want to have consistent, Biblically rooted, Jesus-centered theology. Pastors and staff, Elders, Deacons, and other church leaders like those teaching discipleship classes or mentoring people in the faith...it's important that those people agree with our core theological convictions. Pastors/Elders/Diacons take vows to uphold them. Our core beliefs are on our website. Our denomination has a set of "Essential tenets" that our church's beliefs align with, that we take vows to uphold as well. All of this is so we stay theologically centered on Jesus.

Second: **We want our behavior to flow out of that theology.** Doing that might mean sacrificing some pride because oftentimes the way Jesus and the Bible calls us to live is not how we'd like to. But, that's part of what it means to follow Jesus: we set aside our pride and our desire to be lord of our own lives, and we let him be Lord of our lives instead; We let his word instruct us in our beliefs and our behavior. That's not always easy, just as Paul's teaching to them to separate for a time wasn't easy. But love is often not easy. It takes commitment, and perseverance as Paul writes of in this passage. Jesus' death on the cross, his ultimate act of love wasn't easy: Into his very being he absorbed our sins and the penalty for our sins, as he hung on the cross, and that wasn't easy. Let's not pretend that love is easy or wishy-washy, lest we make a mockery of Jesus' love for us. Sometimes love is really difficult to carry out. **What matters is that our daily lives are rooted in Jesus and right theology that comes out of the Bible, so that our lives will look more and more like his: full of grace and truth.** And that is a compelling and winsome display of the gospel that will lead people on the path toward Jesus.

So, living this life of discipleship is not easy. Paul's counsel to them was not easy. But it's Christ-like. It keeps us on the path of following Jesus. Ultimately, this is what we're called to do in this life. We're in relationship with God our father through faith in Jesus the son, and led by the Spirit, and we want others to come along with us and know Jesus as Lord and Savior as well. That was Jesus' mission, and he was certainly no busybody, and he invites us on that same mission. But, as Paul says in verse 5, and I want to

close with these words that felt like they should have been the end of the letter, and given the time maybe you wish they had been the end of the letter...but they're encouraging for us in this task of living like Jesus...he writes, "May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance." God will work in you and through you - he is faithful as Paul also wrote in this passage - as we live for him each and every day. Let's pray...Amen.