

13 November 2022;
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13;
Pastor Fraser Pearce

OK, let's get straight into the text.

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us.

Who is the 'we' here?

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.

St Paul is writing with his apostolic authority

And writing into a team ministry context.

This team ministry context is important,

Because how we live together as Christian people

Is at the heart of today's reading,

And the Good News is that the message about Jesus Christ

Has power to shape our life together

So that we use the gifts and strengths God has given us

Not only to free us from being an unnecessary burden on others,

But also to free us to do good for each other.

Now St Paul is using his apostolic authority in handing on his teaching,

More than this, he is invoking the name of the Lord Jesus Christ:

What he is about to say has authority from Jesus himself.

As an aside, the church listens carefully

When Jesus' authority is invoked:

The Lords' commands are binding on the church.

This is why, it seems to me, the debates in our own church

Regarding the ordination of woman as well as me to the Public Ministry

Are so protracted and difficult:

St Paul invokes a command of the Lord

In a way that we, in our public teaching,

Read as excluding women from this role.

So our debate has been: Does it or doesn't it?

Now what does St Paul, in team with Silvanus and Timothy,

And invoking the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ command?

This: keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us.

This sounds rather hard assed, to put it colloquially.

But let's think about how our behaviour is shaped.

Why do I tell jokes?

Because enough people reinforce me by laughing.

If that didn't happen, I'd stop pretty quickly.

Now let's take some examples of serious issues.

Let's say we are talking in a group with fellow Christians,
And someone starts talking about domestic violence
As if it's an acceptable thing in the Christian community.
Or they start using racial slurs.

What would you do?

Well, what behaviour do you want to socially reinforce?

There is a time for rebuke,

And pastors can have a special role here.

But another helpful strategy is to walk away from the conversation,

To have nothing to do with Christian brothers and sisters

When they talk and act in this matter.

This is real compassion at work:

Individuals and the community is harmed

When sinful behaviour is not dealt with in any way.

Now, again, St Paul, in team, says this: **keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us.**

If our Christian brothers and sisters are able bodied

But refuse to do anything for the benefit of the community

We should not socially reinforce this,

But step back from them so they come to their senses.

St Paul, by the way, says that this way of dealing with the problem

Is part of the tradition that the Thessalonian Christians

Received from the apostles:

And note how that word, 'Tradition', is used positively here.

It's not a human tradition, but a pattern of life

Handed on by the Lord through the church.

For St Paul in team ministry, this tradition is not words only,

It's also action.

Listen to what he writes: **For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate.**

St Paul and his fellow workers set the Thessalonians a living example

Of not sponging off others, but of working for their bread.

They set this example intentionally

So that the Thessalonian Christians would understand

That Christian love is practical

And leads to the creation of attractive community

Where people can look after themselves and others

According to the strength God has given them.

Did you notice, by the way, that St Paul said
That he and his fellow workers had the right to burden them?
In the Scriptures St Paul is very clear that it is wholly just
For those who serve in proclaiming the word
To be supported by the Christian community.

Listen to this from 1 Corinthians 6: **Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed on the altar? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.**

Again, St Paul is bringing up a command of the Lord,
To show how serious this is in the life of the church.
But St Paul and his companions let go of this right,
So that nothing would get in the way of the Thessalonians
Understanding the importance of work for Christian people.

Just a note before we go on.

Because we live in an industrialised, capitalist economy and society,
We can get the idea that work means paid work only.
But St Paul was living in a different world,
And had, no doubt, a broader conception of work,
Which would have included things like looking after family
And doing the countless unpaid duties and actions
That build of the human community.

I think St Paul would encourage us to apply his teaching
Even in this simple way:
Imagine there's a church lunch, and you're able to help some way.
In making a meal, in paying for something to bring along,
In helping set up or pack down, in serving in the kitchen,
Or in welcoming guests, or in praying for the event,
or in doing *something*,
But you just go along and get your fill of food,
And chit chat with maybe a little spicy gossip,
And you leave: something is wrong.

In fact, listen to how St Paul, writing in team, goes on: **For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.**

Note, he is not saying anyone unable to work,
Because it is a Christian thing to help those in need,
And to bear their burdens with them.
Rather, he is saying, anyone unwilling to work
Should not eat, should not benefit from the work of the group.

Remember, this letter was written from a team perspective
And addressed to, and no doubt read out to, a community.

In other words, they heard this teaching together,
And together reflected on the example
St Paul and his companions set them.
They would have together understood that some behaviours
Should not be tolerated in the Christian community
But dealt with in a way that leads to just dealings,
The right ordering of community,
That makes Christian community attractive.

St Paul reinforces his message by being more specific: **For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.**

St Paul makes clear the extent of the problem:
It's not just that there is idleness, injustice, sponging off others,
But also that the idle time is used to cause trouble:
In busybodiness: in gossip, and complaint,
And in white anting the structure of Christian community.
St Paul again commands, and now exhorts and encourages,
And again invokes the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ,
For Christian people not to live this way.

Our reading ends with these words: **Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.**

But listen to how the reading goes on: **Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.**

This teaching is given to us as Christian people,
Not so that we can make enemies of those baptised into Christ,
Or to think that we are Christians, and they are not,
But so that we can again warn and encourage each other
To live as people who receive the commands of Christ faithfully,
Who admit when we make mistakes or fail to live up to our calling,
And who place in trust in him who gave his life for us,
In whom we have the forgiveness of sins in abundance:
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.