
The Thessalonian Letters

Dealing with the Unruly in the Church

2 Thessalonians 3:6-18



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Paul's command for the church (3:6)

- He addressed them as “**brethren**” but he will “**command**” (*paraggellō*) them with authority: “**in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**”
- “**keep away**” (*stellō*) ~ literally, “furl the sails,” steer clear, move oneself away from, or withdraw oneself. Stop supporting the unruly believers.
- “**unruly**” (*ataktōs*) ~ “to set oneself outside the prescribed order.”
- Living “**not according to the tradition which you received from us.**” By using the same word, “**tradition**” (*paradosis*), Paul links this verse with what he said in 2:15.
- Withdrawing fellowship and support from the unruly was not a formal sentence of excommunication.

Paul's example of right living (3:7-8)

- Paul had already said they were obligated ("**ought**", *dei*, a binding necessity) to constantly "**follow**" (*mimeomai*) or imitate the example of his life (1 Thess 1:6).
- He did not act in an "**undisciplined manner**" (*atakteō*) ~ they never demonstrated insubordination or unruliness in their manner of living. Paul and his missionary team had acted "**according to the tradition.**"
- They did not "**eat anyone's bread**" ~ a Jewish idiom for earning a living by working with one's hands.
 - **What they did:** "kept working night and day."
 - **Why they did it:** so they would "**not be a burden.**"

Paul yielded his rights for the good of others (3:9-10)

- “**not because we do not have the right to this**” ~ he could have asserted his right to the support of the church, which was the prerogative of apostleship. This implies that the unruly may have been attempting to appropriate that right for themselves.
- His ultimate purpose for waiving his rights was so that he could offer himself as a “**model**” (*tupos*) or example that they would follow or mimic.
- “**we used to give this order**” (*paraggellō*) ~ they were to earn their own living in order to provide for their basic needs.
- Paul had taught them and had written that they were to earn their own living, so he expected the Thessalonians to imitate his practice of working to support himself.

Behavior of the unruly, and Paul's command (3:11-12)

- **"we hear"** ~ news came to Paul that some of the Thessalonians were **"walking unruly"** (*ataktōs*).
- **"doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies"** ~ literally, "working nothing but working around." Paul used this play on words to enhance the impact of his description. The Greek verb *ergazomenous* is the same one he used in 3:8 for his **"working"** night and day." But *periergazomenous* means to bustle about uselessly, meddling in the affairs of others in a presumed official capacity. The unruly brethren were not inactive, lethargic, or idle. They were busily involved in other people's affairs.
- **"command"** (*paragellō*) ~ stay at home earning one's own livelihood without meddling officiously in the affairs of others.

Paul's exhortation to the local church (3:13-14)

- **"Do not grow weary"** (*eklakeō*) ~ they are not to be "wearied out" or lose heart so as to give up, but they are to continue to do what is right.
- **"take special note"** (*sēmeioō*) ~ literally, to inscribe marks on something. Used here figuratively ~ they were to clearly distinguish or identify someone by their behavior.
- **"associate"** (*sunanamignumi*) ~ mixing together with others.
- **"shamed"** (*entrepō*) ~ "to turn about." The unruly ones are made to turn and examine themselves so they will be motivated to return to the traditions they had been taught.
- Paul's instruction is that all of the Thessalonians follow his example to "stand firm and hold to the traditions" (2:15). They are to "work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread" (3:12).

The limits on the treatment of the unruly (3:15)

- **“regard”** (*hēgeomai*) ~ to declare something with official authority. The unruly are not to be regarded as enemies but are brethren who must be **“admonished”** (*noutheteō*) ~ “to put into the mind” or to gently reprove.

What characterized the behavior of the unruly ones?

- They were brethren, that is, fellow-Christians (3:6, 15).
- They were not following Paul’s instructions (3:6, 14).
- They were not imitating Paul’s example to support themselves (3:7-10).
- They were out from under proper authority or possibly assuming a self-appointed role for which they claimed support from the church (3:8-9).
- They were not idle or inactive, but were busy in other people's affairs (3:11).

Why were they unruly? *(four views)*

1. **The inherent character flaw of laziness** ~ they were simply lazy idlers.
2. **Persecution and despair caused them to give up normal activities** ~ but Paul had previously praised them for their steadfastness under persecution (1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thess 1:4).
3. **The imminent Rapture led them to stop working** ~ they gave up their vocational activities in order to watch for the Lord's coming. But neither of these letters directly connects the expectation of the imminent Rapture with idleness or laziness.
4. **Their self-appointed ministry activities led them to claim the right of support from the church** ~ they may have stopped working in order to devote themselves to prophesying and ministering to others.

Paul's closing remarks (3:16-18)

- **“the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace”** ~ Jesus is the source of the peace that they need (see 1 Thess 5:23).
- **“the Lord be with you all”** ~ the presence of the Lord Himself would be especially felt as the members of the Thessalonian church work through their issues together.
- Paul's **“distinguishing mark”** of authenticity ~ it was probably not easily counterfeited by his opponents.
- Just as he began this letter (1:2) Paul would close by desiring **“the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ”** for them ~ the unmerited favor, good will, and loving-kindness of God.