

Fact Sheet for “Balance” 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

Pastor Bob Singer
01/29/2017

This is not a passage that is hard to understand. It is a passage that is difficult to apply with balance. Let's take a look at what he says.

^{ESV 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.**

command - *give orders, command, instruct, direct*

tradition – As in 2:16 this word does not mean traditions in the way we think about them. Instead it is a reference to good doctrine and good application.

that you keep away from a brother – You have heard about the practice among the Amish people of shunning. Is this what Paul is instructing the Thessalonian believers to do? Or is it something else?

The single word that is translated “**that you keep away**” means *guard against, be wary of, stay away from, avoid*. But does it mean “shun”? Paul will have more to say in the next few verses.

He had warned against such idleness in a much milder way in his first letter (1 Thessalonians 4:9-12). In 2 Thessalonians Paul gets more forceful and pointed because some did not take these words to heart.

There is a natural pull we feel to help those in need. That pull comes from the biblical command to love other Christian brothers and sisters (John 15:12; 1 John 3:17). When a fellow Christian wrongly chooses to be idle and dependent on others for their survival, this runs against our inclination to show brotherly love to him and help him financially.

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.**

As he gave them a good example in himself he also warned them strongly about those who chose to be inconsistent with that example.

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.**

Remember what Paul wrote earlier in this same letter (1:3). The balance between that love and our choice to let a fellow believer go hungry is a tough one.

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.**

busybodies – those who bustle about uselessly, who are preoccupied with trifling matters, meddlers

Notice that Paul does not give a command here to the other believers to shun those who are idle. Instead he gives a command to the ones who are idle. This point is subtle but here is what I see. Those who are idle are still within the Christian community. If Paul was writing that the church should shun them they should not be, and Paul's words would have been different.

Paul now again encourages the broader Christian community to their demonstration of brotherly love.

¹³ **As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.**

Paul wrote very similar words in Galatians 6:9. But what should they do with a brother who is idle?

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.**

have nothing to do with him – Does this mean “shun”?

The word translated “**have nothing to do**” literally means “mix together”. It means “associate with, mingle socially”. It does not mean “shun”. What it does call for is instruction and the encouragement to diligence. If these aren't heeded then some social distance is called for.

There is another passage that this brings to mind. We have all heard about the Matthew 18 passage on church discipline (Matthew 18:15-17). What we don't often hear is that those words are smack in the middle of one longer conversation Jesus had with his disciples. The whole context of Matthew 18 stresses restoration, not shunning. The verses about church discipline must be seen within that context. Besides, the Gentiles and those who were tax-gatherers should be encouraged to repentance and redemption, not shunned.

Paul now ends with a benediction, then closes his letter.

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.**

So what is the balance?

1. Let your commitment to brotherly love increase.
2. Teach and encourage a diligent work ethic.
3. Don't enable idleness in others, or even make it a comfortable option.

That balance may be uncomfortable but it is the right balance in God's sight.