

Date: 22.2.09

Text: 2 Thessalonians 3

Place: Kingscliff, Tweed AM/PM

Title: The Responsibility of Christians

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Introduction

A famous missionary of yesteryear was going home on furlough and made it his regular habit to pray at the same time in the same place each day. People noticed his emphasis on prayer and his faith that God would change things through prayer. But one day a fire broke out on board they were on and so one of the passengers went up to this missionary and offered to pray with him about it. But the man wouldn't have a bar of it. "There's a time for prayer" he said "and a time for action". And with this he went off to help fight the fire.

There's a time for prayer and a time for action. Yes he was a man of prayer and knew the power of prayer but if there was work that needed to be done, then it was time to roll up your sleeves and work. And so if Jesus is coming back, if toward the end, chaos and lawlessness will permeate our world, as we learnt 2 weeks ago, we will need to be good at both. We will need to find a time for prayer and a time for work. And we will also need to have the wisdom to know when we should be praying and when we should be working. That's what 2 Thessalonians 3 is all about.

1. A Time to Pray (v.1-5)

And so Paul says "*Finally, brothers, pray for us.*" Now the word 'finally' tells us Paul is winding down in this letter. He's on the home stretch. It's always nice to hear a preacher say 'finally' in his sermon, isn't it?! And in this final section he asks them to pray – "*that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you*".

God has done something in you, Paul points out. And you should pray that He does something similar in the people around you. Last chapter Paul was encouraging them that they were loved by God, chosen by God, saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit. He was reminding them that God would encourage their hearts and strengthen them in every good deed and word. And now he prays that God would do the very same things to the other people around the Thessalonians.

Now that sort of prayer may not be the sort of thing you normally pray for but I want to say it is the sort of thing we should be praying for. Not just for safety from the fires and floods, not just healing for our bodies and bones, but that God's message of grace, of mercy, of forgiveness would spread across our community like wildfire. That before the end comes, that God would ensure that more and more people hear the healing truth of the gospel and respond to the truth of the gospel.

See, this world will not go on indefinitely. The world is not like a CD where you can put it on repeat and it goes on and on and on. The world is like a video tape in which once it runs out of tape - it ends. So while there's still time before Christ's return, Paul wants this message of Jesus to spread quickly.

Literally, it says in the passage - he asks for prayer that the message of the Lord may run. What a fantastic phrase - that the message may run. It reminds me of when the Olympic Games came to Sydney and that flame came all the way from Greece. Men and women with torches were running along, passing that flame from one person to the next. Well, Paul asks for prayer - that the message may be passed along rapidly, that the flame, the message may spread to more and more people.

But if the message about Jesus is going to spread, you and I will find out that not everyone likes what we consider the good news. For the gospel is a bit like a magnet. It will attract some people, but also like a magnet it will repel others as well. And so Paul also asks that the Church prays that he "*might be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith*".

Those who are on the front line need our prayers for safety and deliverance. For it doesn't take very long for the initial enthusiasm of ministry to wear off. People don't want to listen. They don't really want to change their lives. They are sometimes blinded to the truth. And so to go out there day after day and represent our God means that all sorts of people will take pot shots at you. In fact even people within the Church will often be the ones that are the hardest to cope with. And so we need to be praying for those who are trying to make sure the message of the gospel goes out.

Now there are many people throughout the world who have placed themselves and their families in physical danger in order to get the good news of Jesus out to as many people as possible. We mentioned a few months back about the situation for Christians in Aceh province in Indonesia. In China, pastors and Church leaders are still regularly thrown in jail. Even in Melbourne a couple of years ago two Australian pastors were taken to court under Victoria's Racial Vilification Act. We need to be praying for our brothers and sisters who are faithfully doing God's work on our behalf that God would deliver them from evil men.

Now you may not value that sort of prayer but I do. And it's funny but in a way I can feel it when you are praying for me. The opposition doesn't hurt as much. The long hours don't wear me down as much. The words and the preparation just flow.

But this sort of prayer is a two way street. The Thessalonians pray for Paul and he prays for them. For he continues, "*the Lord is faithful and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.*" And he ends, "*May the Lord direct your hearts in to God's love and Christ's perseverance.*" In the end, God wants to put his arms around you. Jesus wants to make sure you persevere to the very end. And Paul loves his people so much that this is the sort of thing that he prays to God for them.

Friends, there is a time to pray and it would seem to me that that time is now. I know that it is difficult to get people out for weekly prayer meetings. I know that many of our number feel embarrassed to pray out loud. But friends we have to find a way where you and I grow in our prayers, commit more and more to God in our prayer times and make sure we don't depend upon ourselves as much as trust in a Sovereign and all powerful God.

2. A time for Action. (verses 6-13)

There is a time to pray and a time for action. And Paul recognises that the people in the Thessalonian Church have got these things confused. In a way they have become so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly use. For do you know what they have done? Well when you read through both 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians, it seems that these new Christians were so convinced that Jesus was returning any day now, that they had quit their jobs and they were just sitting around and waiting for the world to end.

And Paul says if you are idle, then you are not living according to the teachings that I have already presented to you. For he goes on to summarise one of those teachings as ‘No work, no eat’! Or *“if a man will not work, he should not eat.”*

Now we need to be clear - Paul is not talking about people who would like to work but can't - that's completely different. And it's not about people who because of age are not working. That's different. No, this is about laziness. As Christians we have no time to be idle, there is just so much to be done. God has placed us on this earth at a critical time. Any moment, the world may end. And as we live in this time of waiting, not only is there a world to be won, but there are mouths to feed, character to develop, work to be done, people to be loved.

And for most of us, that will involve some sort of job. Now working in a job is not a bad thing. For God wants to do something in our world. God is working if you like, and as his representatives, he is calling us to be utterly committed to his work in his world. So he is doing something in our local school, in our local businesses, in our local shops, in our local homes. And he wants you and me to play our part in this incredible cause.

So whether you are a teacher, a baker, a candlestick maker, it doesn't matter. We are earning the money we need for our family to live and as we do that we are attempting to be salt and light to the people around us. It was Martin Luther who once wrote, "The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays – not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps, but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship."

God wants us to be good workers. It is not that the best Christians work just for the Lord and the second best do other jobs. No we all are working for the Lord. We are all full time followers of Jesus. I happen to also work for you as your representative here in this Church but that doesn't make my work any more important than yours, because God wants us all to be good workers.

But if you can't get a job or are too old to work, or you are a full time mother at home, don't feel like you are a second class citizen. For paid work is not the be all and end all. For God may have a different type of work for you to do. To help raise the next generation of Christians as good Australian citizens. To take an interest in your neighbours through your kindness or hospitality. To visit someone who is sick, to pray for those who are lost, to clean the Church, to help with some general maintenance, to sew and crochet clothes for those overseas. Whatever we do is important and so it is important that we are not lazy or idle.

And Paul emphasises this by saying, I didn't just tell you this, I tried to model this. He says, *“Remember what I did while I was amongst you. I could have asked you to for wages as I laboured amongst you, but I didn't. I worked night and day, labouring and toiling, so that I would not be a burden to you.”*

Paul realised that he was model, an example for his fellow Christians. And so he didn't want to be compared to a CEO of a listed company who was getting paid a huge wage, much more than anyone else. He didn't want to be seen as a bludger, relying on the generosity of others. He wanted to be seen as someone who would do anything, anything, so that people could hear the gospel of Jesus and see the gospel worked out within his own life.

For Paul accurately points out that if we are not busy, it is easy for us to become busybodies. If we don't have anything productive to do for the Lord, we can have more time on our hands to see the faults in others, to poke our heads into other people's business, to gossip and to talk about other people behind their backs. We all know people like these and friends there should be no one like that in the Church. Because anyone who acts like that is stopping the Lord's work rather than supporting the Lord's work.

So I wonder is this a word you and I need to hear? Are we a good example for others or a burden on others. Are we making good use of our time, our talents, our gifts and abilities? You are not called to do what I am called to do, neither am I called to do what you are called to do. But we all have work for the Lord to do, so none of us need to be idle. As Paul says, "never tire of doing what is right." Keep on keeping on. Hang in there and do your bit, however big and small that bit may seem, so that people can hear the gospel being preached and see the gospel being lived, in you and I.

3. A time to Discipline

There is a time to pray, a time to work and a time to discipline. And that is where Paul goes to next. He says in verse 14, "*if anyone does not obey our instructions in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy but as a brother*".

These verses contain some of the most important teaching in the Bible on the subject of Church discipline. How should the local Christian community handle a situation in which someone is guilty of serious misbehaviour? Do we ignore it and hope that it goes away? Do we move them on somewhere else and hope the situation does not repeat itself? Do we kick the person out and hope that he repents of his actions?

The Church hasn't been particularly good at discipline in recent years. We either are too strict and condemning and allow no chance at repentance or we are too lax and don't stand up for anything. And besides if we go down the road of Church discipline it's just so easy for a person to go down the road and go to another Church who will turn a blind eye to their previous misdemeanours.

Paul before he finishes this letter wants give us five practical guidelines on the when, why, and how disciplined should be exercised. Let me summarise them briefly..

- a) The *need* for discipline comes not on some trivial offense which can be dealt with discretely or in private, but a public, deliberate and persistent case of disobedience to the word of God.
- b) The *nature* of the discipline which Paul demand is that when people do the wrong thing, you and I should take note of them. That is we should not associate with them. That I don't think means ignoring them, or being rude to them, but don't include them in extra activities, don't invite them over for meals, that sort of thing.

- c) The *responsibility* for this discipline is not just the leaders, but everyone. Leaders may take the initiative, but it is up to the whole Church to follow suit or there will be factions and divisions amongst the Church.
- d) The *spirit* in which discipline is to be administered is to be friendly, not hostile. It is to be done gently, for this person is not an enemy. He or she is instead a brother, a sister that we hope to win back.
- e) Lastly the *purpose* of discipline is positive and constructive. We are not to humiliate someone, nor destroy them, nor make them feel ashamed. For we want our brother to repent, to reconcile, to change and so the aim is for them to eventually join us again.

Can I say that none of this is very easy. There have been times I have been called into a situation like this and it's hard not to take things personally, it's hard to continue to pray for repentance, it's hard because there is always a lot at stake. But if we are going to model the good news of repentance and faith in Jesus, of grace and of law, then it will be in these difficult situations where others will see what we are really like. And so yet again the key thing is to never tire of doing what is right. I have found myself saying to myself and to others time and time again. "I can't change what others do, all I can do is to make sure I do what is right. And pray that God will look after the rest."

Conclusion

There is a time to pray, a time for action and a time for discipline and lastly there is a time to end. So Paul ends his letter by again focusing the Thessalonians on the God who is in control of all things.

"May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way." Yes the world will be a pretty crazy place. There will be sickness, fear, grief, loneliness, flood and fire. Yes the evil that is being restrained will one day bubble to the surface. But God is in control and God is a God of peace. He will give you that peace that you need and desire.

I was reading recently about a doctor who put together a very interesting survey involving his patients. As they waited in the waiting room, they were asked to complete a questionnaire. One of the questions asked was "What is your number one wish?" Do you know what it was? 67% of his patients wanted to have peace of mind! Paul ends with the hope that God would give his follower's peace.

Then he says, *"The Lord be with you all."* We can get this peace from God because he is not watching us from a distant, but has come near. He has joined us in our world, he wants to travel the road of life with you. And as he travels that road, then Paul says, may *"the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all."* What you need most of all is not a timetable about future events, not just good health and good times. What we need is grace, God's grace, presence, God's presence, peace, peace from the Lord of peace.

So as we reach out to God then let us never tire of doing good. Let us understand that God has given us work to do and let us go out and do that. And as we do that I want to leave you with two quotes. The first one is by that famous spokesman, Anonymous. *"A woman's work is never done, especially the part she asks her husband to do."* And the second is by Eleanor Roosevelt *"When you cease to make a contribution, you begin to die."*

What contribution are we making? And is it one where you have found the right balance between prayer and work?