Waiting

Believers are to live in obedience while waiting on the return of Christ.

2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-15

Most of us are not good at waiting. We want to get through the line and get on with our lives. But waiting does not have to be passive, since we can accomplish things even while sitting in traffic. Paul told the church at Thessalonica that they had to wait. They were waiting for Christ to return, and they were to actively live in obedience to God’s commands while they waited. The commands they followed are commands that we too are to follow as we actively wait for His return.

What makes waiting a challenge? What things do you do to pass the time when waiting?
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

2 THESSALONIANS 3:16-18

Paul’s relationship with the Thessalonians began during his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1-10). After a brief stay in Thessalonica, he was forced to leave when his enemies stirred up a mob against him. Paul made his way to Corinth and sent Timothy to check on the welfare of the Thessalonians. Timothy’s report was positive, leading the apostle to write his first letter to the church. Most scholars believe Paul was still in Corinth when he wrote 2 Thessalonians. The second epistle was probably written within months of the first. The Thessalonians had more questions that needed answers, and Paul wrote back to encourage them and to correct misunderstandings caused by the false teachers.

Like in his first letter, Paul praised the church for their faithfulness (2 Thess. 1:3-12). He was encouraged by their perseverance and challenged them to remain loyal to the gospel. He urged them to remember what they had learned about Jesus’s return (2:1-12). Paul emphasized the importance of prayer, assuring the Thessalonians he was praying for them and asking them to pray for him (2:13–3:5). He instructed his readers to live out their prayers. This would include avoiding people whose lives contradicted the gospel, especially those who were idle (3:6-12). Rather than giving in to laziness or complacency, believers are called to work with excellence (3:13). Paul warned the Thessalonians to hold at a distance anyone who disagreed with the teachings he provided—but not so far away that they could not return to the congregation once they repented (3:14-15).

Paul closed his second Letter to Thessalonica with a prayer for peace and for God’s presence (3:16-18). He reminded his readers that he had written the letter with his own hand, which proved the sincerity of his words and his love.

As you read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, underline all examples of the missionaries’ obedience. How did their obedience serve as an example for others to follow?
EXPLORE THE TEXT

ESTABLISH STANDARDS (2 Thess. 3:6-9)

6 Now we command you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from every brother or sister who is idle and does not live according to the tradition received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you should imitate us: We were not idle among you; 8 we did not eat anyone’s food free of charge; instead, we labored and toiled, working night and day, so that we would not be a burden to any of you. 9 It is not that we don’t have the right to support, but we did it to make ourselves an example to you so that you would imitate us.

VERSE 6

God established the standards for His people to follow. The missionaries knew they had significant influence in the life of the church. However, they chose to stand on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. The commands they were proclaiming were not from them but rather from Him.

Paul exhorted the church to keep away from brothers and sisters who were living idle lives. Staying away showed purposeful intent. One cannot casually embrace this command; one must be intentional.

Paul likely was referring to a group within the church that had strayed from the basic teachings of the faith. The word translated idle indicates a habit or lifestyle. In addition to laziness, it also includes the idea of creating chaos or disorder. In Paul’s context, it meant failing to live according to the apostle’s teachings. He had addressed this matter in his first letter (1 Thess. 5:14) but felt the need to revisit his earlier warnings.

How might the low standards being carried by some of the Thessalonian believers become a problem?
VERSES 7-9

The missionaries had lived out obedience in such a manner that the church knew what they needed to do and how to imitate the missionaries’ actions. The word know indicates having a personal knowledge of something. Paul challenged the church to put their knowledge of obedient living into action.

What established standards did the Thessalonians see lived out by Paul and his coworkers? First, they were not idle. This is the same word used in verse 6. Another established standard they modeled was that they labored and toiled. The trio had engaged in difficult work while in Thessalonica. Furthermore, they had done so night and day. Finally, they did not want to be a burden to anyone. The word burden, as used here, has financial implications. Paul, Timothy, and Silas did not want to cause any financial strain for the church. The church was already going through enough as it is.

The missionaries had two goals. First, they wanted to set an example. They did not want to say one thing to the church family and then live a different way. This is hypocrisy at its best. Second, they wanted the church family to imitate the model that was lived out in front of them. Paul was calling the church to a higher standard.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of living in a fishbowl where everyone is watching you?

---

PROVIDE (2 THESS. 3:10-12)

10 In fact, when we were with you, this is what we commanded you: “If anyone isn’t willing to work, he should not eat.” 11 For we hear that there are some among you who are idle. They are not busy but busybodies. 12 Now we command and exhort such people by the Lord Jesus Christ to work quietly and provide for themselves.
VERSE 10
Being unable to work is one thing, being unwilling to work is something completely different. Paul made a distinction between individuals who could not work and those who would not work. He knew that some church members were not able to provide for their own needs. Those individuals should fall under the umbrella of the church’s benevolence. However, any church member who simply refused to work because of apathy or laziness deserved no such provision.

The word translated isn’t willing shows a continuous action. Those who were unwilling to work had developed a habit of living in this state. The ones who exhibited this lifestyle must live with the consequences of their actions. Paul told them that they should not eat. Those members unwilling to work may have been seeking free food, thus his reasoning for saying that the missionaries did not eat anyone’s food free of charge (see v. 8).

BIBLE SKILL: Examine passages that inform a doctrine.
Paul was clear that believers who refused to work should not expect to eat (2 Thess. 3:10). Our understanding of work is based on Genesis 1–3. Review these three chapters and reflect on the work done. How did God model work in the days of creation? When did God first direct humanity to work? What tasks did He give Adam and Eve? How is work related to the curse in Genesis 3? How is that connection often misunderstood?

VERSE 11
Part of loving someone means calling out sinful behavior. The writer of Hebrews said, “the Lord disciplines the one he loves” (12:6). Such
discipline is not a heavy hand but rather a loving heart seeking to guide His children back to His ways.

Paul emulated this loving discipline toward the Thessalonian church. Commenting further on those within the church who were idle, Paul said they were not busy but busybodies. The term busybodies refers to people who are dealing in the affairs of someone else to the neglect of their own. This term reflects a habitual lifestyle. The church needed to be busy about the things of the Lord as they patiently waited for His return. But some church members were busy meddling in everyone else’s business instead of working.

How is calling out a believer who is disobedient an act of love? How would you characterize Paul’s response to the idle believers?

**VERSE 12**

The instruction here is that the busybodies should get back to work. Paul used two words that showed this was not a mere suggestion: command and exhort. Command hints at Paul’s apostolic authority. Exhort indicates urging or encouraging and can be seen as a plea from a concerned friend and leader. Paul’s teaching came by the Lord. Again, he was not simply sharing personal opinion. He was revealing divine truth that deserved the highest priority.

This admonition related to work included two aspects. The first was to work quietly. This word work comes from the same Greek word as “busy” in verse 11. Paul wanted these believers to live productive lives. The errant Thessalonians should mind their own business. (See 1 Thess. 4:10-11.) Instead of instigating chaos, they should demonstrate the satisfaction and contentment that comes from productive labor.

The second aspect of Paul’s admonition was to provide for themselves. This is similar to Paul’s encouragement to the believers
in Ephesus who had once made their way by stealing (Eph. 4:28). The remedy, Paul said, was to work honestly and earn enough to meet their own needs. As a bonus, they would also have enough to be generous. Taken together, the commands provide the remedy for the idleness that was plaguing the church in Thessalonica.

**DISCIPLINE [2 THES. 3:13-15]**

13 But as for you, brothers and sisters, do not grow weary in doing good. 14 If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take note of that person; don’t associate with him, so that he may be ashamed. 15 Yet don’t consider him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

**VERSE 13**

Verse 13 marks a transition. Paul addressed those who are faithfully working and providing for their families. He encouraged them to *not grow weary in doing good*. The phrase *grow weary* indicates one who has lost heart and is on the verge of giving up. The apostle did not want those living in obedience to become discouraged by the actions of those living in disobedience. This was not the first time Paul used this type of phrasing. He told the church at Galatia to not grow tired of doing good (Gal. 6:9). He used the same words on both occasions.

Instead of becoming weary, he wanted them to continue doing good. The phrase rendered *doing good* reflects an ongoing lifestyle, a continual habit. Some within the church were actively living out God’s commands while waiting on Christ’s return. Paul wanted to highlight their actions while offering the encouragement that they so desperately needed.

**VERSES 14-15**

Paul told those who were faithful to *take note* of those who were not. The command was to pay special attention to those living outside of God’s will. What’s more, the Thessalonians should refuse to *associate* with such people. Church discipline, in order to work, would require the participation of every member in good standing.

The intended result of this command was that those living undisciplined and disobedient lives would be *ashamed*. The goal of church discipline is always restoration. Paul did not want the wayward
members permanently removed from the fellowship. It was the church family’s responsibility to fulfill this command so that those living in disobedience would see their errors and return to God’s ways.

How do you feel when you think about church discipline? Why is church discipline not practiced more frequently in the church today?

Paul told the church to not consider the believer living outside of God’s will to be their enemy. Paul later told the church at Ephesus that our battle was not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic power of this darkness (Eph. 6:12). The real enemy is not the one living in disobedience but rather darkness itself.

The real enemy is not the one living in disobedience but rather darkness itself.

The final step in fulfilling this command was to lovingly warn him as a brother. Since the connection with Christ is never lost, the eternal bond between Christians is never lost. Paul underscored that these were not heretics trying to destroy the church. They were family members who needed restoration, love, and healing.

How can a person not associate with someone and yet not view him or her as an enemy as well?

KEY DOCTRINE: Sanctification

Growth in grace should continue throughout the regenerate person’s life. (See Col. 2:6-7; 2 Pet. 3:18.)
APPLY THE TEXT

• Believers must hold up standards that remove barriers to the gospel.
• Providing for our families is one way we demonstrate Christ to others.
• Believers should lovingly hold other believers accountable.

Review your habits and practices, looking for things that might be a barrier to the gospel. What changes do you need to make to remove any barriers discovered?

Reflect on the different ways God has provided for your needs in the past and in the present. Thank Him for the opportunities He gives you to provide for your needs and the needs of your family.

Discuss with your Bible study group the role they play in warning other believers of the consequences of disobedience in an effort toward restoration. What actions can your group take to help other believers without becoming busybodies?

PRAYER NEEDS
by Argile A. Smith Jr.

At the end of Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonian Christians, he gave some exhortations about living out their faith in their city. One of those exhortations had to do with staying away from “busybodies” (3:11). Who were they? What did Paul mean when he warned against associating with them?

Meaning

The Greek word for “busybodies” literally means “to be working round about, instead of at one’s own business.”¹ The literal translation of the entire phrase is “doing nothing but doing around.”² When Paul identified busybodies, he was referring to people who were not tending to their own business (doing nothing) but at the same time meddling into everyone else’s business (but doing around).

Context

Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica began on his second missionary journey, and the pertinent details of his work there have been given by Luke in Acts 17. According to Luke’s account, Paul got off to a shaky start in Thessalonica. Surprisingly, though, he accomplished a major feat in that he planted a church in that
city. Apparently it was a small, fledgling fellowship that required all the attention he could give.

His work of nurturing the newborn believers had to be cut short. A mob stirred to anger made it dangerous for the apostle to stay any longer. Having no other choice but to leave in the night, he went to Berea. There he seemed to enjoy a more positive response to the gospel, but only for a little while. The same mob leaders in Thessalonica followed him to Berea and stirred up trouble for him again. Paul had to leave for Athens where he would be safe.

Apparently anxious about how the congregation in Thessalonica was getting along in the midst of adversity and persecution, Paul waited for news. Timothy, who had stayed behind in the city, later traveled to Athens to meet Paul. There he informed the apostle of the good news as well as the bad news about the church Paul had to leave behind. The good news was that the church was continuing to follow the Lord. The bad news was that some of the believers had become undisciplined and had drifted into immorality while others had developed serious misperceptions about Jesus’s return. In order to address the concerns raised by the news he had been given, Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. Timothy delivered the letter to the church.

When Timothy returned to Paul, he had even more good news-bad news. The good news was that the people were hanging in there in the midst of persecution. The bad news was that some of the people still had problems nailing down the truth about Jesus’s return. Also, some of them had continued to be unruly and undisciplined in their walk with the Lord and with each other. In order to address the new concerns raised by Timothy’s visit, Paul wrote the second letter to the church.

According to 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18, Paul commanded Christians to distance themselves from unruly individuals who had given up on the priority of personal discipline. In order to strengthen his admonition, he called their attention to the time he spent with them. During that time, he and his associates worked long hours so they could pay for their own food. In no way did they want to portray themselves as a burden to the congregation.

Paul pressed them to follow his example. That meant they should not be satisfied with idleness but should continue to
discipline themselves by hard work and loyal devotion to the instruction he had given them when he was with them.

Why had some of the members of the church become undisciplined and idle? Their lack of discipline may have developed from their conviction that Jesus was coming back soon. Because they thought His return would be immediate, they reasoned that getting up early, going to work, and earning money to buy food would be fruitless.

As time went on and Jesus did not return, however, their idleness got the best of them. In due time they lived out the old saying: an idle mind is the devil’s workshop. From the wordplay Paul employed to describe them, they apparently spent their idle time minding everybody else’s business instead of their own (3:11).

For whatever reason, the result was the same: some church members had given up on being disciplined. In their idleness, they started minding other people’s business. That’s why Paul issued a stern warning for them to get to work.

Also he admonished them to stop depending on others for food (3:12-13). Apparently, while they sat idle waiting for Jesus to return, they ran out of food. Instead of going to work so they could get money to pay for food themselves, they depended on others in the church to feed them.

What did Paul say to the members of the congregation who had been victimized by the loafers among them? Paul encouraged them not to give up on doing good things for others (3:13). He also insisted that avoiding the busybodies would bring shame on their undisciplined behavior (3:14).

**Application**

Paul’s rather blunt rebuke of the busybodies in the church at Thessalonica still speaks to Christians today. We, too, may ignore the clear challenge to grow as disciplined believers. If we do, our idleness may get the best of us too. According to the text, Christians who are busybodies simply don’t have enough to do!

While we wait for Jesus to return, we do well to stay busy doing kingdom business. In such an environment, we will have no time to be busybodies.


Argile A. Smith, Jr. is pastor of Parkway Baptist Church in Biloxi, Mississippi. This article originally appeared in the Fall 2001 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*.
COMING NEXT QUARTER

1, 2 KINGS

Session 1  Granted  •  1 Kings 3:4-15
Session 2  Repentance  •  1 Kings 8:46-60
Session 3  Compromised  •  1 Kings 11:1-13
Session 4  Divided  •  1 Kings 12:6-19
Session 5  Return  •  1 Kings 15:9-22
Session 6  Proven  •  1 Kings 18:25-39
Session 7  Hope  •  1 Kings 19:9-18
Session 8  God Heals  •  2 Kings 5:1-14
Session 9  God Provides  •  2 Kings 7:1-15
Session 10  God Honors  •  2 Kings 12:4-16
Session 11  God Judges  •  2 Kings 17:7-20
Session 12  God Hears  •  2 Kings 19:10-19,32-34
Session 13  God Moves  •  2 Kings 22:8-20

© 2021 Lifeway Christian Resources
1, 2 THESSALONIANS

When the apostle Paul penned his Letters to the Thessalonians some 2,000 years ago, he was focused on encouraging these young believers in their spiritual growth and on giving them practical handles for living out their faith in a first-century context. Issues like personal faithfulness, the importance of love, sanctification, the return of Christ, heresy, and even work ethic were hot topics within the congregation at Thessalonica. Thankfully, his pastoral care and concern over the basics of the Christian life still connect with Christ followers today. Since the power of the gospel never changes, the truths found throughout Paul’s Letters to the Thessalonians continue to guide believers toward a meaningful walk with Christ and an effective witness to the world.