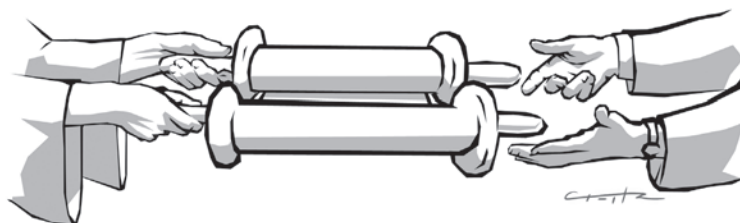


Keeping the Church Faithful (2 Thessalonians 2:13–3:18)



SABBATH—SEPTEMBER 22

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: 2 Thessalonians 2:13–3:18; Acts 17:11; Luke 10:25–28; Matthew 7:24–27; Matthew 18:15–17.

MEMORY VERSE: “Brothers and sisters, stand firm. Hold on to what we taught you. We passed our teachings on to you by what we preached and wrote” (2 Thessalonians 2:15, NIV).

KEY (IMPORTANT) THOUGHT: Even with all the great promises for the future, we have to deal with daily challenges (questioning) and struggles in the church. The Thessalonian church had the same challenges and struggles.

CHURCHES ARE A LOT LIKE PLANTS. If a plant does not grow, it will die. In other words, change is connected with the way plants were designed by God. In the same way, a church that does not change and grow will also die. But not all change is good. Change can lead us away from who we are. It can cause us to forget God's purpose for us. The Seventh-day Adventist Church must be very careful because this present-truth message is being preached by no one but us! That is a heavy responsibility that we as pastors and members must never forget.

Through Bible study and the Holy Spirit's leading, God has led the church to even more light. The light of the past helps the church to work its way through many changes. Paul's final word to the Thessalonians gives us inspired (God-given) guidance in this important area.

SUNDAY—SEPTEMBER 23

**FAITHFUL BY GOD’S CHOICE
(2 Thessalonians 2:13–17)**

The language of 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 brings us back to the prayer at the beginning of 1 Thessalonians. It is almost as if Paul is returning to the place where he began. He is coming to a natural end to this pair of letters. Here Paul shows his concern that the believers in Thessalonica not leave the path of righteousness (holiness).

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17. Why does Paul thank God for the Thessalonians? What does he ask them to do in these verses? How much do these words mean to us today, so near the end?

The lives of the Thessalonians gave proof to Paul that God had chosen them as “firstfruits to be saved” (ESV). Some translations say that He had done it “from the beginning.” Salvation is a gift. But the believer experiences it through sanctification (right living) of the Spirit and belief in the truth. The life of the believer is more than just a personal experience. It is solidly rooted in truth.

That is why Paul is so concerned that the Thessalonians hold to the doctrines (Bible truths) that they have been taught, by letter and by the spoken word. People’s hold on truth often slips with the passing of time. This is why we must always be encouraged by those who preach to us and teach us.

In the early days of the church, peo-

ple often chose oral (word-of-mouth) preaching over written tradition. This is because oral preaching is less likely to cause misunderstanding. Voice and hand signals communicate meaning more correctly than words on a page do. This is why preaching as a method of communication never grows old.

But written messages, such as in the letters of Paul, are less subject to being twisted by those who would change the gospel for their own purposes. The Written Word gives a safer way of sharing truth than preaching does. A person can test the oral messages that come through preaching by the Written Word. In the book of Acts, the Bereans were praised because they tested the oral messages they heard with careful study of the Bible (Acts 17:11).

Read again the verses for today. So many groups are always trying to separate us from the truth. Consider how you have changed over time. Do these changes show a slow but strong stand on the truth or a slow, steady movement away from it? In other words, in what direction is your life moving?



Paul warns church members not to leave the path of righteousness.

MONDAY—SEPTEMBER 24

**CONFIDENCE (FAITH)
IN THE FACE OF EVIL
(2 Thessalonians 3:1–5)**

In today's world many people laugh at the idea of a real Satan. In their mind, Satan is an imaginary person invented (made up) by people of long ago. They do not feel that there is any such thing as good or evil, in the way the Bible teaches.

But the Bible makes it very clear that Satan is real. And it is often to Satan's advantage in some parts of the world to "hide" himself as a red devil with horns. This causes people to believe he is not real. This is exactly what Satan wants. In fact, one comedian (funny man) used to joke and say that "the devil made me do it!"

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:1–5. The challenges to our faith are everywhere. But Paul speaks of hope. That hope is based on what? And we can claim this hope on what condition? Read also Luke 10:25–28 and Deuteronomy 8:1.

Paul begins these verses with prayer (as in 1 Thessalonians 5:25) that the gospel will spread quickly and be honored through his work. Paul also wants the Thessalonians to pray that he will be freed from evil men (2 Thessalonians 3:2). The language here suggests that Paul has in mind several people whom the receivers of the letter might even know.

Paul follows this with a play on words

(2 Thessalonians 3:2, 3). He says that not all men have "faith" (trust in God), but the Lord is "faithful" (dependable; one who inspires or gives faith). This faithful Lord is dependable and will guard the believers against Satan. Satan may be more powerful than we are. But the good news is that the Lord is more powerful than Satan. And we can find safety and power in the Lord.

Paul ends these verses (2 Thessalonians 3:4, 5) by once more praising the Thessalonians and offering a prayer for them. Paul is confident (certain; sure) that the believers are doing what he has asked and that they will continue to do so no matter what Satan or evil men try to do. Paul offers a prayer (2 Thessalonians 3:5) that the Lord will direct the believers' attention to "the love of God" and "the patience of Christ" (NKJV).



Satan loves it when people think that he is not real and picture him as a red devil with horns.

Paul has gone through trials and suffering. But his letters are always

so full of faith and hope. How can we learn to have this faith and hope, no matter how difficult our situations may be?

TUESDAY—SEPTEMBER 25

**SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION
(MAN-MADE RULES)
(2 Thessalonians 3:6–8)**

When Jesus walked this earth, there was no New Testament. The Bible of Jesus was the Old Testament. But from the start, Jesus' followers wisely obeyed His spoken word (Matthew 7:24–27). Jesus' words and actions continued to be the standard (what everything is compared to) for the church in the years that followed (1 Thessalonians 4:15; Acts 20:35; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26). Then, through the inspiration (leading) of the Holy Spirit, the apostles (teachers and church leaders) were guided to rightly interpret (explain) Jesus' words and actions (John 15:26, 27; John 16:13–15). And before the first generation of Christians had died, the writings of the apostles were thought to be fully equal to those of the Old Testament prophets (special messengers). Because of this belief, these writings could be called part of the Holy Bible (2 Peter 3:2, 16).

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6–8, 14. According to these verses, what would Paul include in his understanding of truth?

By the time Paul arrived in Thessalonica, the early church thought that the sayings of Jesus and the teachings of the apostles were part of the Holy Bible. "Tradition,"¹ in New Testament times, was not necessarily a dirty word. It could mean the church's memory of the sayings and actions of Jesus. It also could include the oral teachings and writings of the apostles. Tradition was to the early church very similar to what the Holy Bible is to us. It could be commanded and was to be obeyed.

For the Thessalonians, tradition meant more than just the letters of Paul. It included all that Paul had said to them while he was in Thessalonica. It also included Paul's actions, which they were to follow. For example, Paul worked hard to support himself in Thessalonica. This did not just show that he cared for the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 2:9). Instead, hard work was a "tradition" that Paul expected the believers to follow in their own lives.

This means that Paul was not lazy while he was with these believers. He did not eat other people's food without payment. He worked "night and day" so as not to be a burden to anyone. And anyone in Thessalonica who lived differently was out of order. So, when Paul spoke of disorderly people, he did not mean only those who were rebellious against (opposing; fighting against) the church or community. Paul also broadened his meaning here to include anyone who

1. tradition—rules determined by men to be sacred (holy) or authoritative (standard). In the early days of Christian history, the rules could be good at first. But as time went on, they became more and more twisted and strayed from what was proper and acceptable to God.

Lesson 13 KEEPING THE CHURCH FAITHFUL (2 THESSALONIANS 2:13–3:18)

did not follow the teachings or practices of the apostles.

These verses show how important Paul’s actions were for the Thessalonians. Paul had truth directly from the Lord (Galatians 1:1). But he witnessed by his life and actions and by his words. How well do our lives reflect (show) the truths that we have been given?

WEDNESDAY—SEPTEMBER 26

WORKING AND EATING (2 Thessalonians 3:9–12)

In 2 Thessalonians 3:9–12, what one special kind of problem does Paul face in the Thessalonian church?

In these verses, Paul points to what he did and said in a certain situation as an example of a new tradition. Paul was upset because a certain group of members was rebellious or out of order (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 11). Paul mentioned the problem in the earlier letter and explained it gently there (1 Thessalonians 4:11, 12; 1 Thessalonians 5:14). But he uses much stronger language here.

As an apostle, Paul could have required the church to give him income, housing, and food. But in 1 Thessalonians he sets an example among the believers by “working night and day” in order not to be a burden on them (1 Thessalonians 2:9, ESV). This is an example of love.

But according to 2 Thessalonians 3:8, Paul also works “night and day” in order to give an example of how everyone should take care of his or her own needs as much as possible.

If Paul had just set an example, some could have argued that the tradition was not clear. But Paul also described this issue (problem) with words. During the short time Paul was with the Thessalonians in person, he often spoke a popular saying as a command: “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10, ESV).

In these verses, Paul is not criticizing the efforts of people to care for those in need, or for those who cannot take care of themselves. After all, Jesus Himself left a powerful example of love and mercy toward those whose problems in life left them helpless or poor.

Instead, the target of Paul’s concern was a group of people in the church who were very lazy. They were busybodies² who stuck their noses in everyone’s business except their own (2 Thessalonians 3:11). Like some of the popular philosophers (thinkers) in Paul’s time, these believers chose an easy life instead of labor. Perhaps they spent their time discussing religion or criticizing others instead of earning their living. Paul commands them in the Lord Jesus Christ to follow his example and earn the right to speak by caring for their own needs first (2 Thessalonians 3:12).

It is surprising to see that Paul

2. busybodies—people who like to criticize others.

Lesson 13 KEEPING THE CHURCH FAITHFUL (2 THESSALONIANS 2:13–3:18)

had to deal with so many problems among church members even so early in church history. How should this fact protect us (and new members) from expecting that our churches are going to be filled with saintly (Christlike) people? More important, how can we be positive in our local church, even though we have our own faults and weaknesses?



We should take care of our own needs as much as possible so that we are not a burden to anyone.

THURSDAY—SEPTEMBER 27

TOUGH LOVE³ (2 Thessalonians 3:13–15)

According to Matthew 18:15–17, how is the church supposed to treat a person who has been disfellowshipped (lost his or her membership)?

Church discipline (punishment) is one of the most difficult things that a local church has to do. Often a

guilty member is another member's brother, mother, son, cousin, or best friend. Some members do not want to discipline (punish) anyone. Others want strict punishment. How does a church find the will of God among so many interests or ideas?

Matthew 18 suggests a clear and simple method. First, a one-on-one conversation between the guilty person and the one who is hurt is important. The goal of that conversation is forgiveness, whenever possible (Matthew 18:21–35). Second, the member who is hurt is to take one or two others along to avoid confusion between one person or the other. If these first two steps fail to work, then the problem should be brought up to the church in a business meeting. Then, if the guilty person does not accept the decision of the church as a whole, he or she is to be treated as “a Gentile [non-Jew] and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17, ESV).

Here is the problem. What does it mean to treat someone like a Gentile and a tax collector? There are at least two possible meanings. In one way, Jesus could be calling the church to turn away the guilty one the same way the Gentiles and tax collectors were turned away by the society in which He grew up. But in another way, the church could treat the guilty person the same way Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors: with mercy and forgiveness.

What does Paul have to say about church discipline in 2 Thessalonians 3:13–15?

3. tough love—a way in which people (often parents) care for others (their children) by insisting on strict rules and discipline.

Lesson 13 KEEPING THE CHURCH FAITHFUL (2 THESSALONIANS 2:13–3:18)

It is a challenge to follow Matthew 18 and 2 Thessalonians 3 in the right way. No two people are the same. No two situations are the same. In some cases, forgiveness softens the heart of a guilty person and solves problems in the church. In other cases, guilty ones who are stubborn may only change or soften if they are shown a love that is tough enough to strictly discipline them. This is why the General Conference (world headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church) does not disfellowship anyone. Such sensitive problems are best handled by the local church, because it knows the guilty one best.

Tough love does not permit abuse. According to verse 15, the person being disciplined is still to be treated like family. The church must always remember that the offender (person at fault) is a brother “for whom Christ died” (Romans 14:15; 1 Corinthians 8:11, NKJV).



We must remember that the person who wronged us is a person for whom Christ died.

What experiences have you had with church discipline? How can the church keep a balance between strict discipline and acceptance?

FRIDAY—SEPTEMBER 28

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “The Thessalonian believers were greatly bothered by men with foolish ideas and doctrines. Some were ‘rebellious, working not at all, but . . . busybodies [troublemakers].’ The church had been properly organized. Officers had been appointed to act as ministers and deacons [church officers]. But there were some rebellious and stubborn men who refused to obey those who held positions of leadership in the church.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 261.

“Paul was not wholly dependent upon the labor of his hands for support while at Thessalonica. . . . Philippians 4:16. Paul did receive some help, but he was careful to set before the Thessalonians an example of good stewardship.⁴ None could rightfully accuse Paul of foolish spending. And none who held foolish ideas about not working hard for a living had a good excuse to criticize Paul.”—Pages 348, 349, adapted.

“The custom of supporting men and women in idleness [laziness] by private gifts or church money encourages them in sinful habits. This method should be avoided. Every man, woman, and child should be educated to do useful work. All

4. stewardship—how we manage our health, money, time, talents, property, and so on.

should learn some trade. It may be tentmaking. Or it may be other kinds of business. But all should be educated to use their hands to do honest work. God is ready and willing to increase the ability of all who will educate themselves to do honest work for a living.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 7, page 912.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ❶ How does our church keep its balance between past truths and the new light of God? How can we know when new light is from God and not false?
- ❷ How do we deal with troublesome

church members who always seem to be complaining about something? At the same time, what about those who are sharing concerns about real problems?

- ❸ How can you make use of the important messages in these two letters by Paul in our church today?

SUMMARY: The two letters from Paul to the Thessalonians have taught us a lot about how to be a church in a difficult place. The problems in Paul’s time and in ours may be different. But the principles (important rules) that Paul taught are eternal and still apply to us. This is because they are inspired and are given by the Lord Himself.