

1 and 2 Thessalonians

Keeping the Church Faithful (2 Thess. 2:13-3:18)

Lesson #13 for September 29, 2012

Scriptures: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:18; Acts 17:11; Luke 10:25-28; Matthew 7:24-27; 18:15-17.

1. 1 and 2 Thessalonians are famous for their comments about the second coming of Jesus Christ. But, while Paul discussed those major issues in Christianity, he also dealt with some very practical issues. How does one get along in church? And, what does one do with those people who are unruly or lazy?
2. What happens to a plant that does not grow? Sooner or later, it dies. The same could be said about most churches. God recognizes that churches need to have new blood. They need new members to ask questions, to stir up thinking, and to suggest to the previous members what progress needs to be made. How does that impact a church organization that believes it is to carry an end-time message to the entire world? God has not only given us the Scriptures but also some end-time guidance. How well are we using that guidance?
3. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17. This sounds very much like the prayer Paul offered at the beginning of 1 Thessalonians. Was Paul getting ready to wind up this second small book? Are these two prayers bookends to his presentations? Once again, Paul returned to giving thanks for the believers in Thessalonica. He called them the “chosen of God,” the “faithful,” because they had remained faithful not only to the teachings of the Old Testament but also to the new messages from Paul both in the oral form when he was among them and in the written form of his letters.
4. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13 in several different translations. Why do some translations read *firstfruits* and some translations say *from the beginning*. This is a reminder of some of the challenges of translating from one language into another. In the Greek as it was in Paul’s day, writing was only in capital letters; there were no spaces between the words. So, modern translators not only have to translate, but also they have to decide where to put spaces between words. The Greek word in this verse is *ap’arche*. The first two letters *ap’* are an abbreviated form of the Greek word *apo* which means “from.” *Arche* is a Greek word which means “the beginning.” So, you can see where the translators could get the idea “from the beginning.” But, the other possibility is to leave all the letters together and get *aparche* without a space between the two parts of the word. That means *firstfruits*. So, which do you think Paul had in mind? Or, is it quite possible that Paul recognized these two variables and intended for us to understand both? John frequently used such dual-meaning phrases.
5. Even though Paul stated that those believers were chosen either as “firstfruits” or “from the beginning,” he proceeded to say in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 that faithful church members were to “stand firm and hold onto those truths which we taught you both in our preaching and in our letter.” Once again, there is an interesting word in Greek. The word translated “which we taught you” is often translated as “tradition.” It is an adjective derived from the word *paradidomi* which means “to hand over.” (Compare Romans 1:24,26,28 and 4:25) Paul was talking about the truths which he and his fellow apostles had “handed over” to the Thessalonians.
6. Some scholars consider this to be the first hint that the New Testament Canon was being developed. We believe that these two books to the Thessalonians were the first books written in the New Testament—written many years before the Gospels. Paul was talking about them

as if they were a standard or Canon that the believers in Thessalonica were to hold to in order to stand firm for the future. (See 2 Peter 3:16) This was advice to new believers.

7. Paul was talking about something that Christians have struggled with down through the centuries. Which is more reliable and more important? The oral tradition? Or, the written tradition? What are the advantages of each? If you are present and you hear someone speak the message, you not only hear the words but also you hear the tone of voice and you see the expression of the face. Up to 90 percent or more of the meaning that someone intends to convey is expressed in those other modes instead of the words themselves. This would suggest that the oral tradition would be more reliable because one could get the full picture instead of just a partial picture.
8. On the other hand, the oral tradition—unless recorded and preserved in places like *YouTube*—then becomes just a memory in the minds of hearers. Over time, that memory may slip some or even change in its perception.
9. Thus, the written tradition stands out because while it may not be as comprehensive in its original presentation of all the possible nuances and implications, it is relatively permanent compared to the oral tradition. Today, we have thousands of handwritten ancient copies of portions of Paul's writings. Even though we are living almost 2000 years later, there is little or no doubt about what Paul actually wrote. The question left for us is how to interpret it.
10. Which is more important to your paradigm of beliefs? Is it: 1) The written tradition such as Scripture and perhaps the writings of Ellen White? Or, is it: 2) The oral tradition as presented by preachers and others in various meetings and services?
11. Read Acts 17:11. Paul clearly recommended the Bereans because they not only listened carefully to the oral presentation but also they carefully compared it with the written records in the Old Testament Scriptures. Do we do this after every sermon we hear?
12. Considering your own situation and your own progress in the gospel, do you find yourself slipping away from the traditions that you once believed? Or, do you find yourself settling more and more both intellectually and spiritually into the truth? (See *MS 173*, 1902; *4BC 1161.6*; *Our Father Cares 328.2*; *Maranatha 200.2*) Is this a larger view? Or, a narrower view?
13. Take a look at your church. Is it slipping over time? Many of the "standards" that used to be so important to some have disappeared. How do we know which "standards" are important to keep and which are not? Do jewelry, the length and style of women's dresses, even changing worship styles have anything to do with salvation itself? Drums? Guitars?
14. Read 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5. Is Satan real? Many people laugh at the idea of a real Satan. Many do not believe he exists. Some think that the idea of Satan is merely a metaphor for evil in general. Some people consider him to be nothing more than a superstition.
15. By contrast, the Bible speaks very clearly about a literal Satan. He started the rebellion in heaven, (Revelation 12:7-12) and he has been opposing God's people in every possible way. He is the one who accuses us both day and night. (Zechariah 3:1-5) He was responsible for killing Job's children and destroying his wealth and bringing disease to Job himself. (Job 1, 2, 42) In Scripture we see him opposing every major action that God has tried to undertake to help His people.
16. Paul himself recognized his need for constant prayer. He asked the Thessalonians to pray for him that the gospel would continue to spread rapidly and that wicked people who do not believe may not succeed in stopping it and to continue to be faithful to the Lord and avoid the Devil.

17. Read 2 Thessalonians 3:2,3. Notice Paul once again was using wordplay. Not all people who believe “have faith,” but the Lord is “faithful.” Most of us would agree that God is more powerful than the Devil. God is actually keeping the Devil alive and could terminate his existence at any moment. But, most of us also recognize that the Devil is more powerful than we are. (Consider Job 1, 2, 4, & 42) So, how does the great controversy actually take place? In our minds? When we are being tempted, is it clear that God is more powerful than Satan? Or, do we feel more like we are the weakest one around? Paul continued to pray that the Thessalonian believers would continue to grow in their love of God even into a greater understanding of God’s love and the patience which we all need from Christ.
18. Let us take a careful look at how Scripture and tradition are related. (2 Thessalonians 3:6-8) While Jesus was on this earth, the only Scripture that was available was the Old Testament. Unfortunately the Pharisees—primarily—had added a huge volume of requirements that they touted to be virtually equal with the Scriptures themselves.
19. For Christians in the early days, it was the spoken words of Jesus that were their guidelines. (Matthew 7:24-27) When they met together as groups, they discussed Jesus’ words and actions. That was all the authority they thought they needed. (1 Thessalonians 4:15; Acts 20:35; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26) However, over time, the disciples became widely scattered, and almost all of them suffered martyrs’ deaths. Before that happened, the Holy Spirit, speaking through the apostles guided them to speak the truth and in some cases to write it down, thus correctly interpreting the words of Jesus. (John 15:26,27; 16:13-15) Within one generation, the New Testament had been written and was generally accepted as Scripture. (2 Peter 3:2,16)
20. The writings of the apostles and their teachings were rapidly accepted as being equal to the Canon of the Old Testament. Should we—or have we—treated the writings of Ellen White in the same way?
21. Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-8,14. Paul turned to some very practical considerations. He pointed out that while he himself and his associates were in Thessalonica, they did not expect to be supported by those who heard them preach. They worked hard to support themselves. Is working hard to support yourself as much a teaching of the gospel as the other fundamental truths that we believe? Paul went so far as to say that they should stay away from those who rejected these new messages. Should we do the same in the 21st century with those who are not sure they believe in Ellen White?
22. Paul went beyond presenting the written Word and the oral tradition. He also demonstrated the truth through his behavior. He worked hard to support himself so no one could equate him with one of those “street preachers” with whom the Thessalonians were very familiar. Paul called those who did not cooperate and did not accept that kind of teaching disorderly, even lazy, people.
23. Should we hold current church leaders to this same standard? What about fellow church members? Do our lives all week long reflect the truths that we believe?
24. Some church organizations allow—or even encourage or require—their pastors to work at separate jobs to help support themselves. Why does the Seventh-day Adventist Church forbid that?
25. Read 2 Thessalonians 3:9-12. What do you suppose those unruly/disorderly/lazy people were actually doing? Is it possible that the Thessalonian believers were adopting a communal lifestyle similar to that which we read about in Acts 5 where everyone shared whatever s/he had. Would that tend to attract lazy people, even disorderly people? Certainly, Paul became

an outstanding example of a Christian apostle by living every word that he preached. Is it a good idea for us to follow his example? Paul had done everything he possible could to present the truth to the Thessalonians. His behavior, his preaching, his oral tradition, and later his written words and his letters supported what he had taught.

26. In light of all this evidence, Paul said, “Whoever refuses to work is not allowed to eat.” (2 Thessalonians 3:10, *GNB*) Paul was not attacking those who were trying to help the truly incapacitated—those who were helpless or destitute. He was targeting the willfully idle—those people who would rather be busybodies than busy. They wanted to meddle in everyone else’s business except their own. In a sense, Paul was saying, “True church members and especially church leaders will be examples in their behavior, their speech, and even their writings.”
27. Jesus Himself talked about how we should deal with fellow church members who seem to be at fault in one way or another. Read Matthew 18:15-17. But those verses leave us with an interpretive problem. Was Jesus suggesting that we should treat unrepentant sinners the way the world treats pagans, Gentiles, and tax collectors? Or, was He suggesting that we should treat them as He treated them—with kindness, consideration, and tact?
28. Church discipline is a very touchy and difficult subject. There are many reasons for that. Sometimes, a person who has stepped out of line is a close relative of some prominent church member. Some church members believe that to discipline another member is just not Christlike. By contrast, there are others who take a very firm and even harsh line against misbehavior.
29. So, Jesus recommended a very good plan: 1) If one knows some brother or sister has stepped out of line, speak to him/her about it personally. 2) If s/he will not listen, take another church member or friend; with that witness, the two can plead with the errant member. Finally, if those steps do not work, 3) Take his/her case to the whole church. Have you ever thought it was necessary to take this approach with an offending church member?
30. Read 2 Thessalonians 3:13-18. Paul took up the same issue and presented us with another interpretive problem. While we are supposed to warn those who are misbehaving, Paul said we should not have anything to do with them! How can we do both of those things at the same time?
31. Paul finished off his second short letter in his own handwriting and with greetings. He said, “This is the way I sign every letter; this is how I write.” Then, he wished for them the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.
32. How do we keep a balance between hanging onto those truths confirmed through Scriptures and the writings of Ellen White and following the present truth—the advancing light of God? Is there an easy way to tell when something *is* new light as opposed to a deception?
33. In his final words to the believers, Paul said it was going to be a challenging ride. “Hold on tight but remember that God will be with you through it all.” Furthermore, keep in mind that we have an ultimate goal, that is, the second coming of Jesus Christ. We need to work hard—and not be busybodies—to help promote the spread of the gospel to all corners of the world so that the second coming may not be delayed any longer than it already has been.

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