

Watch and Work
2 Thessalonians 3:1-13
May 28, 2017

Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.

This is Ascension Sunday. Today, most Christian churches will be focusing on Jesus' ascension back to his Heavenly home. However, I want us to look in a different direction. Jesus is no longer on earth, so what happens next?

In today's text, Saint Paul touches on one of the hardest things about the Christian life. As Christians, we are supposed to live as though Christ is coming back at any moment and, at the same time, live as though Christ will not come back during our lifetime.

This letter was necessary because some of the Thessalonian Christians had gotten the idea that Jesus would definitely be back at any moment. Therefore, these folks stopped doing anything. They decided to just sit around and wait. This concept, that since Jesus is coming back there's nothing to do, is disastrous to those who believe it, to the church, and to those who do not yet believe.

As we look at this text, we will answer two questions:

- 1) How do I keep an expectant heart while I wait for Christ's return.
- 2) What do I do while I wait for Christ's return?

Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith (2 Th 3:1-2).

The first thing we do is pray. Prayer is an important part of the Christian life. Unfortunately, for many Christians, it's also a forgotten part. In today's text, prayer serves both goals of watching for Jesus and working for Jesus.

Prayer keeps our relationship with God alive. Prayer helps to draw us closer to God. The old adage about “out of sight out of mind” works when it comes to prayer. The less we pray the less we focus our lives on our Savior. The more we pray the closer we will be to Jesus and the easier it will be to keep an anxious expectation for his return in our hearts.

Prayer also energizes our lives. The more we pray, the more the things we pray about will become a reality in our lives. If you spend a good deal of your prayer time asking God to help those in need, you will begin to realize the need for you to be providing the help you pray for. Thus, God will help those in need – through you.

It works the same with everything in your prayer life. If you pray for God’s Word to reach the lost, you will find it easier to express your faith to others. If you pray for peace in the world, you will become a peacemaker.

Listen a few things Scripture says about prayer:

Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak (Mt 26:41).

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up (Lk 18:1).

And, from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians: *Pray continually* (1 Th 5:17).

Verse three from the text: *The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one* (2 Th 3:3). The next step in reaching our goals of watching and working is to trust in God’s faithfulness.

To bring home the extent of God’s faithfulness, we must answer two questions.

- 1) If God’s faithfulness is taken out of the picture, is there any way for us to succeed in the Christian life?
- 2) If God’s faithfulness is working for us, is there any way for us to fail at the Christian life?

Faithfulness, be it God’s faithfulness or the faithfulness of others, can only be properly judged by one criteria – past performance. With that criteria, let’s review God’s faithfulness.

When things looked very bad, when the Israelites had the Red Sea in front of them and Pharaoh’s army behind them, God opened the waters, his people passed through to safety, and Pharaoh’s army drowned.

When Elijah was on Mount Carmel in a life-and-death competition against 450 prophets of Baal, God brought fire from heaven and burned up Elijah’s offering, which meant life for Elijah and death for the prophets of Baal.

Blind, chained, and a laughingstock, when it looked like he had messed up God's plan to deliver his people from the hands of the Philistines, God gave Samson the strength to bring down the temple of Dagon and free the Israelites.

When we were hopelessly lost in our sinfulness, God send Jesus to live, die, and rise for us, just as he had promised Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

When we remember God's faithfulness, then we can watch for Jesus to return just any moment. Also, remembering God's faithfulness puts us to work because God has a plan for everyone to be saved and we are his chosen instruments to carry out that plan.

The next verse of the text deals with a subject that humans resist: *We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command* (2 Th 3:4). The thing we humans resist is obedience. Paul tells the Thessalonians that he is confident they will do the things he has laid out for them to do. But how could he be so confident?

Paul understood that obedience begins with God. On our own we have neither the desire nor the ability to obey God's commands. Our ability to obey is a gift from God. The author of the book of Hebrews writes: *May the God of peace ... equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him* (Heb 13:20-21).

Our faithful obedience to God's Word fuels our inner expectation of Christ's return. The more we obey, the more we live our lives according to God's plan, the more our faith will grow. The more our faith grows, the more our assurance in the angels' promise: *This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven* (Ac 1:11).

Obedience also impacts the working side of our Christian life. I said that we are God's chosen instruments to carry the Gospel message to the unbelieving world. Too often a statement like that is made without any "how to" information.

The work we do to reach the lost while we wait for our Savior should take two forms; physical work and spiritual work. The instructions for these can easily be found in the Bible.

Physical work: *I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me* (Mt 25:35-36,40).

Whatever needs exist in the world around us, it is God's desire that those needs be tended to by his people.

Spiritual work: *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you* (Mt 28:19-20).

Verse five: *May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance* (2 Th 3:5). To carry out our lives of watching and working, we need God's love and Christ's patience.

Patience is not my strong point. True patience is something that takes much practice. To learn real patience, the text points us to the example set by our Savior. Jesus showed his patience as he dealt with Peter after Peter had denied him.

Jesus demonstrated his patience when his disciples were arguing over who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. That patience showed again as Jesus dealt with a conceited and self-inflated Pontius Pilate.

We practice the patience we have learned by exercising that patience as we anxiously await Jesus' return.

To learn real love, the text point us to the love of God. We need to learn God's love because God's love is unconditional. Human love always comes with strings attached. We must do this or that in order to be loved. Someone else must do this or that if we are to love them.

Not so with God's love. God loves us simply because we exist. God doesn't just love the saved. God dearly loves everyone who will spend eternity in hell. He loves the world, all of the world, so much he sent his own Son to be the ultimate sacrifice for our sins.

When we learn to love with God's love, we will carry out our Christian work in such a way that others will feel God's love. When that happens, our Christian work becomes as successful as it can be.

All of what has been said here sounds good, and it is. It is also very hard to do. With that in mind, we turn to the last verse of our text: *And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right* (2 Th 3:13).

Sometimes we get discouraged, we get tired, we don't feel like praying.

Sometimes we don't trust God's faithfulness as we should.

Sometimes we simply don't obey.

Sometimes we don't love as we should and our patience is a little thin.

Sometimes we wonder why it seems like we're the only ones working.

When these sometimes come, don't quit. Paul tells us to just keep on keeping on. God's promises are true. Jesus is coming back, but we don't know when. It might be today. It might be tomorrow. It might be in the year 3,000. So, we live with these words of Jesus echoing throughout our entire lives: *It will be good for that servant whose master finds him*

working when he returns (Mt 24:46).