

Second Thessalonians 3:14, 15

By John P. Meyer

After our convention in Watertown the undersigned was approached with the suggestion to write a brief study on II Thess. 3:14, 15—and I herewith comply. —In this study I shall presuppose the general background, the history of the founding of the congregation in Thessalonica and of developments during the few months of its existence. These matters will be touched in connection with the study itself at places where they have a bearing on the understanding of the text.

The text referred to is found in the parenetic part of the Epistle. It is thus a point in the application of the doctrines which have been previously presented. The entire third chapter is devoted to exhortation and admonition. Verses 1–4 are general in scope, while v. 5 is a sort of transition to a discussion of the specific problem which confronted the Thessalonians. The case itself is then treated in three short sections. Verses 6–9 lay the groundwork; verses 10–12 state the problem; and verses 13–15 give instruction about the proper mode of procedure. Verse 16 then concludes the matter, harking back to the thought expressed in the introductory transitional verse 5.

Introduction

[Note. We reprint the King James Version, but in the discussion follow the Nestle text.]

V. 5: And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ.

After Paul in v. 4 had voiced his confidence in the Thessalonians that they were carrying out, and would continue to carry out, his instructions (ἡ παραγγέλλομεν), he connects his petition in v. 5 to it with a simple δε (not και, as the King James Version would suggest).

The petition is directed to the Κύριος, the Lord of our salvation, and is expressed in the optative, κατευθύναι, may He direct. This verb was used by Paul in the literal sense in I Thess. 3:11; in the verse now under discussion he uses it metaphorically, as the object “heart“ indicates. Hearts, though living according to the will of God, still need His constant directing, His guidance and strength.

What is the goal of the Lord’s κατευθυνεῖν, not in general, but specifically in the matter of discipline that confronted the Thessalonians? Paul says, εἰς τὴν ἀγάπην τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ εἰς τὴν ὑπομονὴν τοῦ Χριστοῦ. The main question here will concern the function of the two genitives, are they subjective or objective? Does ἀγάπη θεοῦ refer to the love of the Thessalonians toward God, or vice versa to the love which God manifests? It is true, when we handle cases of church discipline, our hearts must be motivated by love toward God, otherwise our best actions will end in a mess. Yet this sense of love does not fit well into the construction of the present verse. Love toward God is an attitude of our heart, and it seems like a somewhat awkward idea *to direct* a heart toward it, a heart which already has that love; verbs like “strengthen” or “increase” would seem to be more in place. —In handling the problem of discipline the Thessalonians must keep their eyes firmly fixed on the great love which God exercised toward the sin-lost world, and must imitate that love, practice just that same love, and apply it in dealing with their case.

The genitive τοῦ Χριστοῦ is taken in the objective sense by the King James Version: “the patient waiting for.” There might be some suggestion for this translation in the fact that the Thessalonians were rather impetuous in expecting the return of our Savior (cf. ch. 2). But on the one hand, does patience mean a waiting? The basic idea of ὑπομονή is endurance. And on the other hand, what connection would there be between a patient endurance of Christ’s delay of His return and their handling of their case of discipline? Should they procrastinate, or be slack, seeing that Christ is not coming so soon anyway? The genitive must be understood subjectively. They must cultivate in their minds and apply in their methods the long-enduring, hopeful, determined, holy love of Christ.

A. Verses 6–9

V. 6: Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. (7) For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; (8) Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labor and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you. (9) Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us.

Paul goes over to this part of his lesson from the introduction with a simple *de*, not adversative, but approximately equal to our English “now.” Παραγγέλλομεν δε, he says. He had used the same verb in a broad, inclusive way in v. 4, about their carrying out his instructions. Now he applies the same verb emphatically to the specific procedure as it is necessary in their particular case. Παραγγέλλω is literally: to pass a message, an order, etc. along the line; then simply: to command.

In giving the present order Paul is not following his own reasoning, his own analysis of the situation, his own wisdom, but he is acting ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, thus solemnly using the full Messianic designation of our Savior. The work which the Thessalonians are now to do is a part of our Savior's work in building His Church. Paul underscores this implication by addressing the Thessalonians as ἀδελφοί, which in this case is more than a winsome title of endearment. He is not giving orders in a legalistic fashion, nor are they to receive them and carry them out in a legalistic spirit, but in the spirit of their Christ-created brotherhood.

His orders are that they στέλλεσθαι, withdraw. The form is the present infinitive, thus expressing a rule to be followed, possibly a process of some duration, involving different steps at different times, but never wavering till the work has been completed and either the desired result has been achieved, or failure has become evident. Paul will give some more detailed instructions later on.

From whom are they to withdraw? Ἀπὸ παντός ἀδελφοῦ ἀτάκτως περιπατοῦντος. We note the word ἀδελφός. Paul is not speaking of the relationship existing between neighbors, fellow citizens, business associates and the like, but about fellow believers; hence the withdrawing itself must not be conceived as a social, economic, political separation, but as purely ecclesiastical. (Compare the outline given by Jesus in Matt. 18; cp also I Thess. 5:14.)

The translation of ἀτάκτως in our King James Version is misleading. Paul is not speaking about disorderly conduct according to the modern use of the term, whether it be flagrantly scandalous or but mildly deviating from the conventional. He will use the word again in vs. 11. —In our present verse he gives us an explanation himself of how he wants to be understood. He says, καὶ μὴ κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν ἣν παρελάβετε παρ' ἡμῶν. A παραδοσις is a teaching or precept as it is transmitted by an instructor either orally or in writing (cf. chap. 2:15). It is here used, not for some individual doctrine or precept, but for the converting, spiritual life creating Gospel message as a whole. (Nestle has, which *you* have received; the King James follows a variant reading.)

The Thessalonians have received the Gospel. With regard to time it was not a very extended course. Paul had the use of the Jewish synagogue for only three Sabbaths (Acts 17:2). But in content it included also a chapter on Antichrist and his connection with Eschatology (ch. 2:5). In order to realize more fully the rich content of παραδοσις we look at a few things which, according to ch. 2, it included. In speaking about the end of the world Jesus had warned His disciples that false prophets and false Christs would arise with such seductive doctrines that even God's very elect would be in danger of being deceived. But He had also given the promise that for the elect's sake the days would be shortened. When now the Thessalonians became all excited about a rumor that the return of the Lord was at hand, Paul, in accordance with Jesus' own predictions, reminded them that before the Lord's return an apostasy will take place, culminating in the activity of Antichrist, whose mysterious power was at work even in Paul's own day. Of this Paul reminds the Thessalonians; and all this is to be understood here in παραδοσις.

According to this παραδοσις, which they had received from the apostles, they should regulate their conduct; and if any one fails to live according to it, they should withdraw from him. Περιπατοῦντος is the

present participle. Thus Paul is not speaking of some accidental lapse—that can happen to any one—but of a life which habitually disregards the παραδοσις. That is what Paul calls walking ἀτάκτως. The mode of living of such a brother may in itself, judged by ordinary standards, be highly respectable, but because it violates the παραδοσις in some way it is irregular, ἀτάκτος. Thus both doctrine and practice are involved.

What particular point Paul has in mind becomes evident from the following verse, where he introduces his own, and his companions', example. He not only invites the Thessalonians to copy him, but says that this is necessary, δεῖ. It would be violating the spiritual life which Paul is spreading through the Gospel, it would be a symptom of spiritual death, if any one failed to imitate the Gospel messengers in this respect, because we οὐκ ἠτακτήσαμεν, a litotes, we kept ourselves strictly in line with the Gospel.

With οὐδε Paul now adds the specific point which he has in mind, and which is being neglected by some in Thessalonica. It is this: Οὐδὲ δωρεὰν ἄρτον ἐφάγομεν παρά τινος. The aorist ἐφάγομεν covers the entire stay of Paul in Thessalonica. It is constative. Thus it does not mean to imply that Paul never accepted an invitation to a meal from any of the believers; but his regular policy was, not to seek meals at other people's tables. The important word, in the emphatic position, is δωρεάν, by way of a gift. No, he did not "sponge" his meals from any one. So important is this point that Paul elaborates on it positively. How did he and his companions make their living? Ἐν κόπῳ καὶ μόχθῳ νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας ἐργαζόμενοι, laboring night and day in toil and travail. Think of what that meant in the case of Paul and Silas after the beating they had received from the Roman lictors and after spending hours in the innermost prison cell in Philippi with their feet in the stocks. Yet they willingly submitted to such hardship for the sake of a principle: πρὸς τὸ μὴ ἐπιβαρῆσαι τινα ὑμῶν, in order not to put a burden, or to be a burden, on one of you.

Paul would not have done wrong if he had requested an adequate remuneration for his labors in bringing the Gospel to the Thessalonians. We need not now repeat his own explanations from I Cor. 9. In order to make his personal example all the more impressive for the Thessalonians Paul now stresses not only the fact of his earning his own living, but also shows that this was a voluntary sacrifice on his part: οὐχ ὅτι οὐκ ἔχομεν ἐξουσίαν. But why did he not avail himself of his ἐξουσία? Ἵνα ἑαυτοὺς τύπον δῶμεν ὑμῖν εἰς τὸ μιμεῖσθαι ἡμᾶς. Paul had been called to preach the Gospel of God's boundless love, and he underscored the truth of the Gospel to an extraordinary degree by his mode of living, in order that the Gospel might in no way be hampered in remaking the Thessalonians in the likeness of Paul in faith and sanctification.

We do well to take note of these points in order to evaluate the irregularity of some of the Thessalonians properly.

B. Verses 10–12

V. 10: For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. (11) For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. (12) Now them that are such we commend and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread.

In this section Paul briefly outlines the wrongs in the action of some members in Thessalonica, and states the aim to be achieved by disciplinary action.

He begins by repeating the ethical principle involved, as he had proclaimed it while present in Thessalonica. The thought expressed by the connective καὶ γὰρ is very similar to our English *namely*, or, *to come to the point*. In presenting the principle Paul uses the same verb which he had used in a sweeping way in v. 4, and then again emphatically with a very specific reference in v. 6. Here he repeats it in the imperfect tense, and with special reference to the principle in question he says παρηγγέλλομεν, we commanded, again and again; we explained the command, we made it the basis of instruction, showing not only its meaning but its connection with God's order and with the sanctification of a Christian. The principle is briefly this: εἴ τις οὐ θέλει ἐργάζεσθαι, μηδὲ ἐσθιέτω. The idea of the negative οὐ θέλει, he wills not, is for all practical purposes equivalent to the positive, he refuses, he deliberately avoids. Paul is not speaking of any one who is

handicapped, who through injury or disease, or in some other way, has become incapacitated for work. No, but if any one for an unsound reason insists that he is exempt from working, he is wrong, he must be corrected. To let him have his way would mean to confirm him in his error. He simply must not eat.

How was this principle violated in Thessalonica? Paul outlines the case on the basis of the report which Timothy brought back from his visit. We hear, Paul says, ἀκούομεν. The report is that some walk ἀτάκτως, the same word which he had used in v. 6, and had there defined. He now specifies their behavior with a play on words which cannot be reproduced in English. He says, μηδὲν ἐργαζομένους ἀλλὰ περιεργαζομένους. (Hendrikson in his commentary tries to imitate the paronomasia by translating “busy workers” and “busybodies,” p. 202.) Ἐργάζομαι means to perform productive labor. The adjective περιεργός is applied in Acts 19:19 to works of witchcraft, and in I Tim. 5:13, to gossiping women. The verb περιεργάζομαι means to be meddlesome, to be a busybody. Paul thereby charges some Thessalonians with giving inordinate expression to an inordinate urge.

Putting the various elements discussed in the Epistle together we get the picture of people who, captivated by the thrill of Christ’s supposed imminent return, dropped their regular work and, without a call from the Church, went about admonishing everybody to get ready for the great event.

Paul had a call from God, they had no call. Paul proclaimed the Gospel for men’s salvation, they pestered people with a soul-endangering error. Paul, while preaching, worked with his hands to earn his living, they, while being meddlesome, demanded free board. So they were wrong both in practice and in doctrine.

What must be the aim of disciplinary action in their case? In stating it Paul repeats the verb which he already used three times in the chapter: παραγγέλλομεν. But in order not to be misunderstood as though he were using the term in a legalistic way: This is the law, apply it, and that’s that, he added the verb παρακαλοῦμεν, a verb which may express various degrees of urging, from rebuking up to comforting, as the situation may be, with παραγγελλεῖν Paul in vs. 6 used adverbial modifier ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ; here he adds to the two verbs the phrase: ἐν κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ, with no appreciable difference in meaning. —It would be comparatively simple to apply the rule (no work, no food) in a rigoristic way, and have the matter over in a short time; but that would not be applying the principle in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whose patience Paul prayerfully directed his readers in v. 5.

The aim is stated as: ἵνα μετὰ ἡσυχίας ἐργαζόμενοι τὸν ἑαυτῶν ἄρτον ἐσθίωσιν. Note that Paul does not merely say that they should work, but adds emphatically μετὰ ἡσυχίας, they should concentrate on their vocational work and quit their officious meddling. And in doing this they would, under God’s blessing, eat their own bread, and not, as they are doing now, actually stolen bread.

C. Verses 13–15

V. 13: But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing. (14) And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. (15) Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

This section begins with a very emphatic Ὑμεῖς. Δε is adversative. It places the ὑμεῖς into sharp contrast to the τινες mentioned in v. 11. Those τινες were still counted as brethren in vs. 6, but they are brethren who require a special treatment, which the ὑμεῖς are to administer. Paul used the pronoun of the second person plural quite frequently in the chapter under discussion, both in the verb endings and as separate words. Every case of the pronoun occurs. Who are these ὑμεῖς? They are the ones whom Paul in the salutation addressed as the ἐκκλησία Θεσσαλονικέων ἐν θεῷ πατρὶ ὑμῶν καὶ κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ (ch. 1:1). These are the “you” and they are now to act as Church of God. They have erring brethren, sinning brethren in their midst, and it is their God-given task to endeavor to bring them back on the right path.

Paul addresses them as ἀδελφοί, reminding them of their high calling as members of God’s heavenly family, thereby stirring up in them the spirit of brotherhood and stimulating them to action as is proper among a group of brethren.

What is the action to be undertaken? Paul uses a term which sounds very general, and about the meaning of which commentators have done much guessing. He says, *καλοποιοῦντες*. Since the busybodies demanded free sustenance, contrary to God's principle that he who refuses to work thereby forfeits the right to eat, some commentators contend that the congregation might be in danger of becoming tired and by and by grow lax also in their care for the really poor and needy. They understand *καλοποιεῖν* as referring to charity work. But the administration of charity is not under discussion in the chapter.

Others say that with *καλοποιεῖν* Paul wants to encourage the congregation that they do not become disturbed in their Christian conduct, so that they also would permit themselves to be misled by the bad example of the busybodies; that they should rather keep on working quietly, and eat their own bread. Thus they understand *καλοποιεῖν* of the proper Christian conduct, in contrast to the irregularities of the busybodies.

The entire context suggests a different connotation. The congregation must take action about those busybodies. Disciplinary proceedings are never a pleasure. Difficulties and annoyances in their wake are endless. The Thessalonian congregation was not welcome to the general citizenry; many members had to suffer from their own relatives. Would not disciplinary proceedings lead to dissensions and rifts in their own ranks? Would they not expose themselves to ridicule and invite rougher attacks from their enemies? Would it not be better to give those busybodies, for a time at least, all the rope they want? —That would not be *καλοποιεῖν*, that would be sidestepping the task of brotherly admonition which God had plainly set before them. —Paul wants to say, But you, brethren, do not hesitate to tackle the unpleasant task, and do not relax in your efforts to win the erring brethren.

How are they to proceed? Paul now presents some practical suggestions.

Εἴ δὲ τις οὐχ ὑπακούει τῷ λόγῳ ἡμῶν διὰ τῆς ἐπιστολῆς. —What does the prepositional phrase *διὰ τῆς ἐπιστολῆς* modify? According to the rules of classical Greek it would have to be considered as an adverbial modifier; to make it an attributive modifier would require the repetition of the definite article. There is only one verb in the sentence. But it does not make good sense to combine the phrase to it: by means of the letter he refuses to obey our order. Luther changes the punctuation and combines the phrase with the verb of the next sentence: *Den zeichnet an durch einen Brief*. This is made highly improbable by the definite article before "letter" (*the* letter; not, *a* letter), and by the middle voice of the verb: indicate him *for yourselves*. By a letter you would indicate him for some one else's benefit. The most natural construction is to combine *διὰ τῆς ἐπιστολῆς* as an attributive modifier with *τῷ λόγῳ ἡμῶν*: If any one refuses to obey our word which we handed to you in this letter. The reference is to vs. 12. (This is facilitated by the fact that *λόγος* contains the verb idea of speaking.)

Thus Paul made it very easy for the Thessalonians to take the first step in their disciplinary proceedings, the first step always being the most difficult. He embodied an admonition in his present letter, which was specifically addressed to those busybodies. All that the congregation would have to do was to read just that portion to them. Once this beginning had been made, the rest would follow more easily. Paul hoped, and the Thessalonians hoped, that the erring brethren would heed the appeal and cease their irregularities.

But what if any one refuses? Paul continues, *τοῦτον σημειοῦσθε μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι αὐτῷ*. (Note. This is the Nestle Text. The variant readings are interesting, but do not materially affect the sense.)

Σημειοῦσθε, note him for yourselves. Paul does not say, You must keep a list of black sheep, and now enter his name on the black list. But he does say that they as a group and as individual members must take note of the fact that Brother So-and-So has ignored the admonition which Paul addressed to him in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. To ignore such a grave matter would leave a blemish on their own Christian character.

The purpose of this *σημειοῦσθαι* is not merely to keep the records straight. Here is a man who insists that he is a brother, yes a more active brother than the rest. Paul warmly pleads with him in his letter to desist from the error of his doctrine and of his practice; but he ignores the plea. How will the congregation take note of such a case? Will they keep on admonishing, but otherwise act as if nothing had happened? No, they will adapt their action to their observation. Paul uses the verb *μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι*. *Μίγνυσθαι* indicates a mingling, *ανα* strengthens the idea, and *συν* adds a touch of intimacy. This must stop upon noting the offender.

What does this term include? Since Paul has all this while been speaking about “brethren” and “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,” it should be clear that he is not thinking of intercourse in political, financial, social, economic matters, and the like. True, he does not mention associations of such kind in this case, as he did on another occasion. When he wrote to the Corinthians that they must avoid fornicators, they misconstrued his words to include contact in secular matters, and he cleared them up that he is not speaking of sinners in the world, but of such as insist on being members of the Christian brotherhood (I Cor. 5:9–13). With συναναμίγνυσθαι Paul is referring to various forms of church fellowship. Such fellowshiping must be suspended, at least restricted, as will best serve the purpose which it is the aim to achieve. That purpose is, ἵνα ἐντραπή. In some cases a milder form of suspension may be sufficient to achieve this purpose, in others even the most severe form may fail.

The verb ἐντρέπειν literally means to turn in or on. In the New Testament it does not occur in this literal physical sense. In most cases it denotes some expression of reverence and respect (cf. e.g., Matt 21:37; Luke 18:2, 4). Three times it is translated with “shame” (besides our passage, in I Cor 4:14 and Tit 2:8). In order to understand our passage it will be helpful to hearken back to the original meaning of the verb, as it would appear in a German rendering: *damit er in sich gehe*, that he may be brought to his senses. (All translations which I consulted simply use the term “shame,” Luther even says, *dass er schamrot werde*.)

The man is not a hopeless case. Although he ignored Paul’s letter, and thus apparently persists in his irregularity, yet he seems amenable in a measure and susceptible to admonition. At least Paul assumes that it will still be possible to induce a feeling of shame in him, and that he will not simply shrug off the whole matter.

As long as this condition is in evidence, he must not be written off as an enemy. Paul continues with και, thus treating his two injunctions, not as contrasts, but as mutually supplementary parts of the same procedure, the one positive, the other negative. Restrict, interrupt, suspend church fellowship with such a brother, and (thereby) avert writing him off as an enemy. Καὶ μὴ ὡς ἐχθρὸν ἠγεῖσθε. Ἠγέομαι does not merely mean to consider in your thoughts, it includes the corresponding action. —Thus Paul reminds his readers to be guided in every step which they take by the love with which God seeks the sinner, and by the patience which Jesus Christ manifested in rich measure (v. 5).

The offender is not yet an enemy, he is still a brother; and as a brother he should be treated. Ἀλλά here indicates a real contrast, ἀλλὰ νοθετεῖτε ὡς ἀδελφόν. Νοθετεῖν does not have the unpleasant connotation which our English verb “to set right” carries. It simply means to instruct correctly. Of course, this action may take on different forms according to circumstances, ranging from gentle teaching to a harsh reprimand. Paul considers his letter as a form of νοθετεῖν, and he envisions a further brotherly νοθετεῖν by the congregation, accompanied by a suspension of church fellowship.

We note that Paul expressly says ὡς ἀδελφόν. He does not say, Treat him in a brotherly manner, but much more, Treat him as a brother. In spite of his public irregularities he still is a brother. The bond of brotherhood has not yet been severed. And all steps taken by the congregation and by individuals must clearly reflect this truth. Their aim must be to win the brother from the error of his way, to retain him as a brother, to strengthen the bonds of the brotherhood, which were weakening dangerously, almost to the point of snapping by his irregularities and his neglect of Paul’s admonition in his letter.

Since the error of the busybodies is known to all members of the congregation, disciplinary action has reached the third stage of the procedure as outlined by Jesus in Matt. 18, and the νοθετεῖν will be carried on along the lines of I Tim. 5:20. If this νοθετεῖν by the congregation is ignored by the offenders, then the last possibility of winning them will have been exhausted, and the last step of στέλλεσθαι (v. 6) will have to be taken.

Conclusion

Paul set before the Thessalonians a tremendous assignment. Well may they have asked: “And who is sufficient for these things?” As he prefaced this part of his Epistle with a prayer to God, so he also concludes it.

V. 16: Now the Lord of peace himself give you peace alway by all means. The Lord be with you all.