

## **“A Covenant of Accountability” – 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15**

I hope you have seen by now that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians to correct some misunderstandings that had invaded the church. False teaching had crept in and false teachers might have even forged a letter, claiming that it came from Paul. It seems they were teaching that the Day of the Lord had already come.

Paul said, “Not so fast, folks.” There are some things that have to happen first. There will be a great apostasy, and the man of lawlessness, the Antichrist, will be revealed. In the meantime, our duty is to stand fast and rest on the promises found in scripture. We need to be about the business Jesus left for us to do. We need to be His witnesses in this world until He returns. And we all need to be productive members of His body, that is, the Church.

*... that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:14-16)*

If you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ and are trusting in Him alone for your salvation, you are a member of the Church ... with a capital C. That is the universal Church, the Bride of Christ. You are members of His body and you are co-heirs with Jesus of the heavenly kingdom. This Church universal transcends space and time, so with regard to the universal Church, even the Apostle Paul is your brother in Christ.

But there is also such a thing as local church membership, that is, church with a lower-case c. Canyon Community Church is part of the greater universal Church as was the church at Thessalonica. When Christians join local churches, they enter into a covenant of accountability. We agree to assemble with one another for worship. We agree to support one another. We agree to hold one another accountable and sometimes, that involves church discipline. It can be uncomfortable subject, but it is a subject we find in the Bible, so we must not neglect it. In our text this morning, we will see how Paul strongly exhorts the Thessalonians, and us, to be serious about this responsibility of holding one another accountable.

*But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us. (2 Thessalonians 3:6)*

That’s pretty strong! There were individuals within the church at Thessalonica who were behaving so badly that Paul tells says they need to be disfellowshipped. Don’t have anything to do with these people, he says.

What was the problem? There were those who were slackers. They were lazy. They refused to work. Part of their rationale might have been a faulty eschatology; If Jesus was going to return today or tomorrow, why should I break a sweat to earn a living? So, instead of doing what they were supposed to be doing, they had become dependent on the church. We can’t be sure what sort of argument they used. Maybe it was something like “Jesus is coming so we can’t waste our time working; we need to evangelize.” (That sounds really pious, doesn’t it?) Or maybe it’s this attitude: “Jesus told you to take care of the poor, so we are your self-appointed charity cases.”

Well, we are supposed to take care of the poor, but we are not to take care of those who are poor by choice. Giving a hand-out to someone who refuses to work is enabling unruly behavior.

We were made to work and when we don't work, we tend to occupy our time with destructive habits. We become gossips. We become busybodies. We become Internet trolls.

Our culture these days tends to have a pretty low regard for work much of the time. So often, we see it as a necessary evil but work was part of God's original creation.

*Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. (Genesis 2:15)*

That was before the fall.

Consider Jesus, who was an itinerant preacher for a bit over 3 years, but was a carpenter for over 20. If that doesn't sanctify labor, I don't know what does.

In Ephesians, chapter 6, we read:

*Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. (Ephesians 6:5-8)*

That is all about having the proper attitude about work. In other words, Christians are to be the best employees ever. Not because the boss is watching but because it is God's will. We work for Jesus! That must be our attitude.

Paul uses himself as an example.

*For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us. (2 Thessalonians 3:7-9)*

Paul had every right to expect the churches to support him. He wrote this to Timothy:

*Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE AN OX WHILE IT TREADS OUT THE GRAIN," and, "THE LABORER IS WORTHY OF HIS WAGES." (1 Timothy 5:17-18)*

And to the Corinthians, he wrote:

*Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel. (1 Corinthians 9:14)*

But Paul had chosen to not take support from the Thessalonian church. Instead, he made his own money. He worked as a tentmaker. This isn't to say that he never accepted support; we know that he did. The Philippian church supported him time and again and from the "thank you" letter Paul sent to the Philippians, we read:

*For even in Thessalonica you sent aid once and again for my necessities. (Philippians 4:16)*

Paul was never a burden to the Thessalonian church. He could tell them, “Hey, listen guys, if I could work for my sustenance while delivering the gospel to you, you can certainly do the same!” It’s always good when you can say “Do as I do,” not just “Do as I say”.

So, Paul continues:

*For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. (2 Thessalonians 3:10-11)*

Really, this is an issue of church discipline. Remember how I said earlier that when a Christian joins a local church he or she enters into a covenant of accountability? We need to expect the best from one another and when we fall short, especially in a public way, our brothers and sisters need to call us to account. These individuals who refused to work were a burden on the church. They were not just a burden financially, they were a burden socially. They were busybodies. They were gossips.

Gossip is such a destructive practice and it is so easy for us to fall into it.

*And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. (James 3:6)*

Gossip divides. It can divide and destroy a church. And, do you know what two of the seven things God absolutely detests are?

*A false witness who speaks lies, And one who sows discord among brethren. (Proverbs 6:19)*

Paul says these folks need to be disfellowshipped. “Withdraw from them and if they won’t work, don’t feed them.”

But as church discipline is executed, we need to understand and remember that the goal is full and complete restoration.

*Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread. But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good. And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. (2 Thessalonians 3:12-15)*

Too often, Christians see church discipline as a means of getting even. “You offended me. You caused me grief. You sinned against me. Now you are going to pay! And if I frame it as an issue of church discipline, I’m going to sound really pious while I pay you back!”

That must never be the motivation. The goal is restoration.

*Do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*

If you love someone, you want the best for them, don’t you? Jesus loves us. He loves us enough that He doesn’t want us to spend eternity in hell, which is what we deserve. So,

he came to earth, lived a perfect, sinless life, then sacrificed his life to pay the penalty for your cosmic rebellion. That's love!

*Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. (John 15:13)*

If you love your brother or sister in Christ, you will want to admonish him when he strays, but you will do so in a way that brings him back into full fellowship with the body of believers. You will do so in a way that leads to repentance.

*Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:1-2)*

This is part of what the true Church does. By speaking the truth in love we ...

*... may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:15-16)*

In the life of every Christian, there are marks of maturing faith. They are like signposts, marking your progress toward ultimate sanctification. The first is by far the most important. If you don't pass this signpost, you have merged onto the superhighway that leads straight to hell.

You must be born again. By an act of faith, you must decide to confess Jesus as your Lord and Savior. You must believe God raised Him from the dead and if you do, you are saved. You are guaranteed an eternity of absolute bliss in the kingdom of heaven.

A second signpost is believer's baptism. Baptism doesn't save you. If you haven't already been born again and confessed Jesus as your Savior, all you get is wet. But if you are a Christian, baptism is an important public testimony that you identify with Jesus Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. For most people, it is a huge step of faith. In much of the world it means that they will be persecuted for the rest of their lives. Praise the Lord, we don't have to worry about such persecution here! So, if you haven't been baptized, I highly recommend it.

But a third signpost is the act of joining a local church. Frankly, a lot of people don't see the need to formally join a church. It is not explicitly spelled out in scripture, although I would argue that it is implied. One of the greatest marks of faith is that you develop a love for other Christians and you want to be associated with them. And listen, if you worship with us regularly, you're part of our family whether or not you have been accepted into formal membership.

So why is membership a big deal? It is your commitment to join with the people of God. It is a covenant of mutual accountability. Those of us who join a church are pledging, under Almighty God, to be accountable to one another, accountable to live a life that glorifies Jesus Christ. And when we fall short, especially in a public way, we expect our brothers and sisters in Christ to admonish us.

Jesus gives us a clear procedure for holding one another accountable. We find it in Matthew, Chapter 18.

*"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your*

*brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY WORD MAY BE ESTABLISHED.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. (Matthew 18:15-17)*

Oh, by the way, how did Jesus treat heathens and tax collectors? He loved them! When church discipline is executed, every step must be done in love. The goal of disfellowship is always restoration.

Let me finish with just a little plug for membership. If you worship here regularly but have never joined this church, the requirements are quite simple. They are spelled out in our Constitution and By Laws. First, you must confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. (Atheists need not apply.) Secondly, you must agree with our Statement of Faith. Thirdly, members shall pledge themselves to attend the services of the Church; to live the Christian life, to share in the life and work of the Church; to give systematically to its support and benevolences; and to seek diligently the spiritual welfare of all the Church members and members of the community.

It is a covenant, a covenant of mutual accountability.