

"The Grand Sez Who" 2 Thess. 3:1-18 Nov. 12, 1995

Text Comment

- v. 6 This idleness, which Paul will describe more completely in vv. 11-12, was apparently related to their confusion regarding the second coming. Thinking it to be soon, they had come to regard the daily round of duty unimportant and unspiritual.
- v. 7 In commending a life of hard work and faithfulness to responsibility, Paul asked of his congregations nothing but what he had practiced himself.
- v.10 The importance of context in the reading and interpretation of Scripture is illustrated by the fact that Solzhenitzen tells us that this verse was written over the door of a canteen in the Soviet Gulag.
- v.14 The level of punishment Paul describes here falls short of the total excommunication the Lord Jesus spoke of in Matt. 18 when he advised his followers to treat impenitent church members as "tax collectors and sinners" or that Paul practiced elsewhere such as in 1 Corinthians 5. He does not seem here to be contemplating a situation that has gone so far either in the public scandal of the sin or in the hardness of heart on the part of the church member who has been warned, even ostracized to a certain extent, but still not yet repenting.

In American society today, so argues Yale Law professor Arthur Leff, the all-purpose response to all assertions of authority is "the grand sez who." He meant that, in our day, since religious authority has been diminished or abandoned, people feel entitled to behave as they please and object to the notion that they must follow the commands of others. "I must do this? Sez Who?"

Public education, of course, has proceeded on this principle -- however inconsistently applied -- for many years now. Educators argue that education should not be authoritarian, as if we have the right to decide ahead of time what kind of person a boy or girl should be when he or she grows up. They should be free to make that choice themselves without coercion, even from their parents. The goal is a self-defining adult who chooses his or her values and lifestyle from a host of alternatives, rather than obedient children who follow a particular course laid down for them by their parents and/or their school.

[Johnson, Reason in the Balance, pp. 147, 156ff.]

Now we may quite rightly complain that the public schools, in fact, recommend, teach, and enforce a particular set of values and a particular lifestyle all the while they are proclaiming their unwillingness to do so, but that is beside my point. The point is, we live, without question in a culture that has a terrible problem with authority and is deeply suspicious of the imposition of commandments and requirements from above. I'm to do this or that: sez who?

Let us be absolutely clear about this, however. That resistance to authority, that challenge of the

obligation to submit to rule is fundamentally anti-Christian. For the Christian life is a life of obedience. It is always and everywhere in Holy Scripture a life of obedience. It is, to be sure, a life of grace and forgiveness and love, but that is never said to mean that it is any less a life of obedience. The Christian is a man or woman under orders, whose way of life has been handed down from above, whose duty is not to be free, but to adore and obey. As even godly men, such as Moses and Zechariah have learned, the living God does not give orders to his servants that they might discuss them or amend them, but that they might obey them, immediately and without question.

Listen to the Apostle Paul in these verses:

"In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we **command** you...

"Such people **we command** and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ...

"If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter...

And then, to make matters much, much worse, in the opinion of our modern culture, he goes so far as to say that if certain folk in the church in Thessalonica will not obey his commands, will not submit to the teaching of the apostle, will not honor the rule of the Lord Jesus Christ in his church, they are to be shunned, ostracized, punished until they change their mind and begin to practice the obedience required of them.

It is one thing to say that to be a member in good standing of the Christian church one must obey a set of commandments and submit oneself to the rule of God's law. Its another thing altogether to take that so seriously as to require that a person be judged and punished who does not live according to the teaching of the Bible in some particular respect.

Now, the simple fact is that in most Christian churches today what Paul says must be done **is not done and is not done on purpose**. In our culture it is considered by many pastors, many elders, and many congregations simply too much to ask that folk actually be required to obey the commandments of God or face banishment from the church. They don't have any interest in making or enforcing such judgments. And they don't think people would stand for it if they did.

And, no doubt, they are right in many instances. The proliferation of lawsuits against churches that have practiced church discipline is one evidence of the way in which our culture views the entire enterprise. The resentment and resistance of even long-standing Christians to any church censure -- no matter what their behavior may have been, is another evidence. It once was expected that the church would require those who wished to wear Christ's name to keep his commandments. It is now regarded as unloving, judgmental, and psychologically harmful to her members if a church has the audacity to follow Paul's instructions here in 2 Thess. 3 or the Lord's own rule in Matthew 18:15-18.

Christians today are people of their time, their age, in many more ways than perhaps they would

wish to admit. Obey this law, keep these commandments, follow this rule? "Sez who?"

It is, of course, a giggle to Hollywood to think that those puritanical, straight-laced, hide-bound, hypocritical, mean-spirited pilgrims would force Hester Prynne to wear a scarlet "A." And they would think it a giggle that Thessalonian Christians would ostracize those who refused to live by the rule of Christ.

But do you see why? You see, adultery is a giggle to Hollywood and to much of our contemporary culture. No wonder practices that take adultery so seriously should seem alien and harmfully authoritarian.

Let me commend to you Paul's insistence on the practice of discipline in the church with two simple arguments. More could be given, but we can content ourselves this morning with two.

I. First, the rule of obedience must be enforced in the church, seriously and meaningfully enforced, because it will be enforced in the judgment day of God.

Paul's point, as v. 14 makes clear and as every other passage on the subject of church discipline confirms, is that by this means the wayward, the rebellious brother may be won back to obedience. But why is that important? Well, there are several reasons, of course. There is the Lord's name and the honor or dishonor that the church brings upon it by its life. There is the welfare of the people of God as a whole. If disobedience is tolerated more and more Christians will live disobediently. That point is made both directly and with many illustrations in Holy Scripture and, alas, the life of the church in our own time provides as grand an illustration of that principle as would ever be required.

But, still more, the disobedient believer must be won back **before it is too late for him**. Those who live their lives in rebellion against the commandments of God, **hear me: especially those who do so in the guise of Christian believers**, will not inherit the kingdom of God.

This is Paul's view of church discipline. When he summarily excommunicated the man in Corinth who was living with his step-mother, he gives as his reason exactly this. "Hand this man over to Satan -- cast him out of the fellowship -- so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord." And this is the logic of the Bible's teaching that ministers and elders have the responsibility and the authority to exercise rule, **in the name of the Lord**, in the church. It is Christ's rule being enforced upon the people, his judgment, when the church's officers rule according to Holy Scripture.

You remember the Lord's almost unbearably solemn words: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." And then he goes on to make the fearful point that he is talking about church members and church-goers. "**Many** will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evil-doers!'"

Which is to say, they will say to the Lord, Lord we were loyal, active church members all our lives and we did a great deal in the church. And the Lord will say to them, but you did what you wanted to do and you did not do certain things that I commanded you to do. And in your picking and choosing between my commandments and in your preferring some commandments to others, you revealed yourselves to be, not my servants, but your own. My servants and my servants only, enter the kingdom of heaven.

Yes, you have heard those words before, and perhaps you have trembled at them a time or two. But has it occurred to you that in the entire history of the church in the world, most of its membership has fallen in that category of those who think themselves saved and who are, in fact, not? And do you realize that, humanly speaking, the greatest reason for that fact -- the most tragic fact in all of human life and history -- is that the church of God **has permitted them, no, it has even encouraged them** to think that they could be Christians in fact without submitting their lives to Christ's rule.

Paul's point is exactly this: the church has the most solemn duty to enforce upon his membership this conviction: that if they will not submit to Christ's rule, they will not be saved. The judgment of the church, its discipline, its ostracism of its rebelling members, as Paul requires here, is an anticipation of the judgment day of God. Church discipline, John Owen, the great puritan theologian wrote, is a prolepsis of the last judgment. [XV, p. 522; Ferguson, p. 182] The church is saying to its rebellious members: "Dear ones, we cast you away from our fellowship because of your disobedience. Consider what it will be like, if you do not repent, to be cast away from the fellowship of God's people forever and to be forever from the presence of God." Paul is saying simply: judge them now, so that they will not be judged forever later.

Do you see how the two doctrines go together. The practice of church discipline will never thrive where belief in the last judgment is wavering or has withered. Church discipline is the last judgment reaching ahead of time into this world.

In one of the last sermons he preached to his own congregation in Dundee, just before the sudden onslaught of the illness that would take his life, the saintly pastor Robert Murray McCheyne in a terribly solemn sermon on hell, told the congregation that he had acquitted his conscience before them, that he had warned them of the wrath to come, that he had told them that there was such a place and such a condition as hell, and had urged them and pleaded with them to follow Christ and so escape that fiery wrath that will overtake all the impenitent and unbelieving. "Your blood," he said, in that solemn sermon, "will be upon your own heads."

Well, Lord give us more ministers like that. But, don't you see, if the church will not practice the sturdy resolution Paul here requires, if it will not require its people to submit to Christ's rule, even if it had a faithful minister such as McCheyne, it would be taking back with its left hand what truth the pulpit had extended with its right. Churches that will not require their people to live the Christian life -- not perfectly, or course, but sincerely -- are churches that, whatever they

may say in their pulpits, are, by their example, taking their children and leading them by the hand to hell. And the church of God has been doing that for multitudes of its members for thousands of years.

That is the first great argument for faithful church discipline. It anticipates the judgment day of God and warns, as almost nothing else can, against such a superficial commitment to Christ as will by no means stand up to examination on the great day. "Depart from me, I never knew you."

II. Second, the rule of obedience must be enforced in the church, seriously and meaningfully enforced, because that rule is life, health, peace, and joy to every Christian.

It is the Devil's work to persuade Christians that Christ's laws are burdensome, unnecessary, restrictive, and confining. Our sinful nature welcomes that message. But in nothing are we more shortsighted and foolish. We think we will be happier for less control and for less of God's commandments to keep -- and like the little child who gets no discipline, we become by throwing off Christ's yoke, cranky, wild, and dangerous to ourselves and others.

The godly have always understood that the commandments of the Lord are, in fact, not burdensome but a light to our feet and a lamp to our path. They knew it was sin and sin only that made them to chafe under these laws and that, far from restricting them and oppressing them, the laws of God set them free to live an authentic human life of joy and fruitfulness.

I wish very much that I could play the piano as Mr. and Mrs. Bechtel play it or the violin as my wife plays it, or the trumpet as my son **will play it someday, if he practices more faithfully than he has been lately!** I wish I were free when I sat down at a piano bench, free to make those keys produce whatever beautiful music I choose. But I am not free, for I never subjected myself to the laws and the rules and the discipline of that musical instrument. I refused the laws and now I sit in bondage before the piano.

And life is just like that. Which is why the laws of God are everywhere urged upon us as God's gift to us, as the pattern for a life such as you and I want to live, full of the happiness we crave. That is why the godly have always spoken of God's law as one of his supreme gifts to us:

Oh, how love I thy law, it is my meditation
all the day.

He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws
and decrees to Israel. He has done this
for no other nation; they do not know his
laws. Praise the Lord. [Ps 147:19-20]

Isn't it striking that the Lord Jesus should have invited sinners to himself by saying: "Come unto

me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." You find **rest** in taking upon you the yoke of Christ, the rule of Christ. It is rest and freedom and peace and pleasure to be ruled by the Lord Jesus.

But your sinfulness will try all your life long to convince you otherwise. But the experience of the saints has always been, as the beautiful hymn has it:

Take his easy yoke and wear it,
Love will make obedience sweet.

Do you know, ladies, that in Calvin's Geneva, in a day when church discipline was practiced seriously and consistently, Geneva was known as "le paradis des femmes" (the paradise of women) because the elders there did not permit men to mistreat or to desert their wives. God forbids men to be cruel and boorish toward their wives and so the church forbade it too. And when they found it, they punished it, swiftly and surely.

I hope no one here doubts that more and more obedience to God's commandments, purer and deeper submission to his rule, would bring to us all greater happiness, greater peace, greater security, and greater fruitfulness in life. The Scripture tells us this: "In keeping the commandments of God there is great reward!"

So, brethren, let there be no question here. We will live together as Paul has here taught us, in obedience to the rule of our Lord and Savior. Church discipline will be practiced as the Scripture commands. And if someone pities us for it, let us say without apology:

No, my friend. I am prone to wander, all of God's people, forgiven though they may be, are prone to wander. I do not want to be where I might wander and no one call me back. Where I would be allowed to indulge the most dangerous illusion of all, that Christ will acquit me on the great day even though I have not lived in submission to him and his laws. I want to be where I am constantly reminded that my claim to being justified and forgiven is forfeit if I am not willing to be subject to Christ's rule and where my children will grow up fully understanding that if they want to wear the name, they must live the life. And, I want this not only because I want to stand in the day of judgment but because I want to live this one brief life I have to live under a mortal sun as a loyal servant of Jesus Christ, giving glory to him, my Savior, by proving to myself and to everyone around me that his yoke is easy and his burden is light.