

DEALING WITH SIN IN THE CHURCH
August 20, 2000

INTRO: This morning we are looking at the fourth and last case which I find in the NT that calls for the church to take certain measures when wrong is done by a member. It is found in 2 Thessalonians. The matter is the problem of idleness, failure to work with their own hands. It seems that the Thessalonians were plagued with this problem.

Now many commentators have concluded that this problem resulted from Paul's teaching on the second coming. For example, the Jamieson Faucett and Brown commentary says, "Hence some neglected their daily business and threw themselves on the charity of others, as if their sole duty was to wait for the coming of the Lord. This error therefore needs rectifying, and forms a leading topic of the second epistle." My own conclusion is that the problem resulted, not from Paul's teaching on the second coming but it was a weakness of the nature of the Thessalonians themselves.

There are two basic reasons for that conclusion. First, Paul had detected this weakness in the Thessalonians when he was first there. When he wrote his first epistle he addressed this problem in 3:10-12 and 5:14. Then in 2 Thessalonians he has to address it again.

This brings us then, in our outline to the matter of dealing with less severe cases.

b. Less Severe Cases

- 1) The passage (2 Thess. 3:6-15)
- 2) The problem

The problem, as we have seen earlier is that of idleness. It is here coupled with the label of walking disorderly (3:6 and 7). The word disorderly is *ataktos*, the same word as used in 1 Thess. 5:14 we saw earlier. It means to deviate from the prescribed order of rule. The prescribed order is referred to as, "...according to the tradition which he received from us." Now contained in that tradition was Paul's teaching regarding the Christian's responsibility to work. It is more clearly spelled out in 7-9. Then in verse 10 Paul goes on to say, "For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither let him eat."

We will find later that this problem of idleness is an inherent problem in the

Thessalonian church. There is no question that this is not a problem in our own culture here at LaCrete. I am not aware of this ever being a social problem among Mennonites. That does not mean that we do not have problems. We do, but idleness is not one of them, generally.

However, Paul mentions this problem in 1 Thessalonians 4:10-12. Idleness, first of all tends to gossip. I think that is what is meant by the words, "And that you study to be quiet..." The New International Commentary On The New Testament says, "The verb rendered 'to lead a quiet life' is used of silence after speech (Luke 14:4), cessation of argument (Acts 21:14), and rest from labor (Luke 23:56)." It then goes on to say, "(Ward sees quietness as opposed to 'being busybodies.'" It is not new to us that idleness wants to tend to being a busy body.

The second problem is spelled out in verse 12, "That you may walk honestly toward them that are without..." The Christian's testimony before the unsaved is under consideration here. Idleness is a bad testimony towards the unsaved.

The third matter that is found in the words, "...that you may have lack of nothing." As long as health and ability are there, one ought not to be a burden on others. To fail to provide for one's own is a very serious offence against God. We are not talking about times when due to extenuating circumstances one cannot provide. 1 Timothy 5:8 says, "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel." Romans 12:6 further instructs us, "Provide things honest in the sight of all men." This then is the problem that constitutes the less serious offense.

3) The procedure

When we compare this less serious case with that of 1 Corinthians 5 we immediately notice a difference. In 1 Corinthians 5 there is no hesitation. Paul says, "I have not been there to see this problem, I do not need to have been there, there is one course of action and that action needs to be taken immediately." Rather, in this less severe case Paul has taught patiently with the hopes of gaining correction.

He has evidently sought to correct this problem by patient instruction.

From 1 Thessalonians 4:11 we find that Paul had instructed the Thessalonians regarding their responsibility to work when he was there in person. Paul had evidently picked up on this weakness when he was there and he has carefully instructed them regarding this matter, explaining as well, why this is so important.

Then when he wrote the first letter, he felt he needed to instruct them again on this matter. He must have heard that in spite of his earlier instructions, there is still idleness among the Thessalonian believers. We find this in 1 Thessalonians 4:10-12. We have looked at these verses earlier.

However, Paul mentions this again in 5:14. He writes, "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly..." The word translated unruly is *ataktos*. We find this same word again, and that, three times in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 7 and 11. It is translated *disorderly*. It means to deviate from the prescribed order or rule. The prescribed order or rule was that the Thessalonian believers were to work with their own hands to provide for themselves.

So, at least twice Paul has clearly instructed them with regard to their responsibility to work. When we come to this same topic in 2 Thessalonians he is approaching them on this matter for at least the third time.

Paul has patiently sought to change their life-style by instruction. In 2 Thessalonians 3 Paul is broaching this matter for at least the third time and his patience is running out.

In verse 11 he says, "For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies."

Now in verse 12 he gives his final instruction, "Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread." And so, if Paul's instruction in this letter were heeded, then no further action is needed. But if the procedure of instruction and exhortation still

does not produce results, then Paul gives the prescription for such problems.

4) The prescription

He writes in verse 14, "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."

Two things are to be done. First, "Note that person." The Greek means to set a mark upon him. We sometimes use the expression, "He is a marked man." That is the idea here. It would seem to me to be in order for the church to make this decision (see 5:14).

Second, Paul instructs, "...do not keep company with him..." The word to not keep company with this person is the same as that in 1 Corinthians 5:11. It means to not mingle or mix with. Again, as I have said before, this matter of avoidance or shunning is the same in every case of church discipline.

Now the purpose was, "...that he may be ashamed." This again is in order to bring the person back to a right relationship, it was redemptive in purpose.

Now I think verse 15 gives us the spirit in which such action should be taken. This person ought not to be treated as an enemy but admonished as a brother. This would be an overriding principle in the whole process and in meting out the prescription.

2. Matters Affecting Another Individual

a) The passage (Galatians 6:1)

The passage for consideration here is Galatians 6:1: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted."

We are dealing again with wrong in the Church for the apostle is addressing the brethren. The first word for consideration here is the word *overtaken*. We have here before us two possibilities of understanding.

b) The problem

There are two views regarding this problem.

*December 12, 2002: See Trench 246, *paraptwmati* possible a wrong done unintentionally or by mistake.

a) Caught by a person

The first view we will consider is that a person who is living in sin is caught by surprise by another in the wrong (JFB commentary says, "caught in the very act". The Wycliffe Bible commentary says; "Apprehended, taken by surprise, caught in the act." Ellicott says, "not only caught but caught red handed, in the very act, before he can escape."

b) Caught by a sin

The second view is that this person has fallen into an error unawares. (Vines; Calvin; Matthew Henry, "Brought to sin by the surprise of temptation." The Theological Dictionary of the NT says it is, "being betrayed into a fault unawares." The Dictionary of NT Theology says, "Here *prolempthe* suggests in the *pro* of the initial syllable that the sinner has been forcibly laid hold of by sin before he was able to reflect. Paul therefore requests gentleness and brotherly assistance. John Eadie says this is the most common interpretation. That is why gentleness is so important here.

It is my personal conclusion that this is not a case where someone has caught a brother in sin by surprise. Such a sin could be any sin, even a gross sin and would then call for removal rather than restoration. It seems to me that what we have here is something subtle. The word translated trespass or fault is the Greek word *paraptwmati*. The verb of this word is used in Hebrews 6:4 about falling away. The Hebrew Christians were becoming discouraged and slowly slipping back to old ways. It is probably from this word in Hebrews and its connection to the word in Galatians 6:1 that the Jamieson, Faucett and Brown commentary says of the fault or trespass in Galatians 6:1, "'a transgression', 'a fall', such as a falling back into legalism."

No doubt, what is not in view is some serious immorality or such like.

c) The procedure

The procedure is to have spiritual, godly, experienced people in the church to come alongside the one overtaken in a fault and work with him or her in the spirit of gentleness. The requirement is not strong action against this thing but gentle instruction.

d) The prescription

The ultimate prescription is restoration, "restore such a one." What we have here is not a case of church discipline. In the case of church discipline we have such prescriptions as *removal* or *rejection*, but here it is *restoration*.

3. Matters affecting myself (1 Cor. 11:31)

We go now to our final and last passage on dealing with sin in the church. However, here it is not man but God who deals with the sin.

a) The passage (1 Cor. 11:26-34)

b) The problem

It is my understanding that what we have here is not someone living in sins such as are visible to others. If it were there are prescribed ways in which the church is to deal with such issues. It is a heart issue. It is a sin which the church does not know about but the person does. It might be something like unconfessed sin or secret sins or bad attitudes such as are dealt with in 1 Cor. 11:17-22. The problem is that of carrying hidden sins in the heart. It is not a problem such as man can surely detect and deal with either in church discipline or in gentle restoration. It is a problem of darkness hidden in the heart.

3) The procedure

The procedure is personal. Like the Psalmist, one ought to pray, "Search me O God and see if there be some wicked way in me." Someone has said that with sin we should not keep short accounts, we should keep current accounts. Before we partake of communion we ought to examine or judge ourselves (11:28, 31). You see, no one knows what the other is carrying in the heart, therefore such sins are no one's responsibility but the person him or herself. If we do not take care of sin here, and

though no one on earth knows about our sin God does and He will personally see to it that such things are dealt with. If we repent of our wrongdoing, all is well. If not we come to God's prescription.

4) The prescription

Verse 29 says that if we eat the Lord's bread or drink the cup in an unworthy manner, and surely God knows, we drink judgement to ourselves. Paul writes the possible consequences for such wrongdoing in verse 30, "For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep." You see, the consequences of such wrongdoing is exactly the same as wrongdoing that the church has to deal with in excommunication. God brings about judgement on the body of the person in order to seek to bring about repentance.

CONCL: With that, we bring to a close our series on dealing with sin in the church. We have seen how sin is to be dealt with if it involves a sin between the two parties. We have found that the Scriptures give instruction on how to deal with those who bring false teaching into the church. We discovered further that God's Word gives directives on how to deal with sin in the lives of individual believers. We looked at matters that affect the church; matters that affect another individual where such a person is caught by sin unawares. In such cases other believers are key. Last we saw that God Himself deals with people who harbor sin in their hearts that are not visible to others.

I say in conclusion that this is not a pleasant topic. It is a matter that we wish we could avoid. But avoid it we cannot, without expense.