

II Thessalonians 2:1-12, To Love the Truth

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Introduction: Just Another Point of View?

For the second year in a row, my family and I devoted some of the free time of the Christmas holiday break to watch the *Star Wars* movies. All of them. Last year I had a daughter who was ten years old who had not seen any of them, and *The Force Awakens* had just come out, a new launch for the franchise under Disney ownership. This year another *Star Wars* movie was released, and I have a fifteen year-old in my house who had never seen any of the *Star Wars* movies. So we did it all again. For the first time in my life I actually got a little bit tired of *Star Wars*. But not so tired that I won't use it for a sermon illustration.

There is one scene where my favorite character, Obi Wan Kenobi, is in a desperate fight with his protégé, who has turned to evil. As they are catching their breath, Obi Wan tries to warn his student that his mind had been twisted by the lies of a dark lord of evil. The young student replies that from his point of view, it was Obi Wan and his order of Jedi Knights who were evil. To which Obi Wan replied: "Well then, you are lost."

Billy Graham could not have said it better. Hollywood has to remind us that good and evil are real and that the choice of evil is wrong, because many churches have lost that message. Having different points of view on the truth is one thing, that is part of life, that is the joy and the challenge of being the Church, and of living in a society of diversity and democracy. But selling one's soul to a lie is something else. Replacing the truth with lies on the excuse that it all just depends on a point of view is the path of the lost and its end is destruction. The spirit of lawlessness is already at work, and believers are called to be set apart by our love for the truth.

Let us pray: God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our world is lost in darkness; let your light be a beacon of hope to your people, and draw the lost to you in Jesus' name. Amen.

1. Reading Faithfully

At the time Paul wrote II Thessalonians, the believers did not have the complete Bible. They had the Old Testament, plus the visits of the apostles, most of whom were still alive. When Paul left the Thessalonian Christians, a frenzy of end-time speculation began to cause confusion among them, with all kinds of weird teaching. Paul returns the Thessalonians to sound doctrine. It is not enough, he writes, to take at face value a teaching or writing that claims to have an apostolic basis. Whatever is taught must cohere with the rest of what is taught in the apostolic point of view before it can be accepted. Paul says to them: *Do not become easily alarmed by teachings that supposedly come from us (that is, the apostles) whether by a prophecy or by report or by letter....Don't let anyone deceive you in any way.*

Today, even though we have the whole Bible, we still get deceived and caught up in weird doctrines. Believing that the Bible tells us the truth, some tend to assume that we can understand its truth on our own terms. That leads to strange doctrine, as for example, Bible "experts" on t.v. who make their guesses about the identity of the Lawless One. It is too funny that Paul describes the Lawless One to get the Thessalonians to speculate less, not more, about the End-times. Christians need to re-visit the lesson Paul is teaching here, about how to discern teaching, so that we can read the Bible faithfully on God's terms rather than our own.

In the Covenant Church we say that the Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, are the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct. That is a high view, and it puts so much at stake, it would be best if we knew how to read the Bible. To receive the

scriptures as God's Word, we need to honor the author's intention towards the first hearers or readers of the text.

The Bible is read faithfully when readers try to enter into the points of view of the author and the audience, grasp the function of what is being said, and then apply that function in their own contexts. What that means for you is that a pew Bible which has almost no notes is not the best kind of Bible for your personal devotions or to use in a group Bible study. A Bible with study notes is much more useful.

I learned from Klyne Snodgrass, now retired, but long-time New Testament professor at North Park Theological Seminary, this principle about authorial intent. He went on to name the person who recovered this approach to understanding and interpreting the Word of God. That person was Martin Luther, who started the Reformation of which we are now in our five hundredth year. But as a pioneer in recovering this, Luther was not perfect or consistent in his approach of authorial intent, as becomes clear in his understanding of this very text.

2. A Doomed Cause

Paul tries to talk the early Thessalonian Christians down from their enthusiastic speculation about the end-times, by reminding them of some things that had to take place first before the second coming of Jesus Christ. There was going to be a break-down of order and a general rebellion against God, the word used by Paul is "apostasy." This rebellion will be led by a popular but entirely evil public figure. However triumphant this evil person might appear at first, with miracles and public support and all the rest, his overthrow will be sudden and dramatic and total, by the breath of the mouth of Jesus Christ. As Luther writes in the Reformation hymn:

"For lo his doom is sure: One little word shall fell him."

In this lesson of authorial intent combined with the theme of the Reformation, I now have to bring up a point that is hard to talk about, because it is awkward and even a little bit embarrassing. Five hundred years ago, when Luther catalyzed the Reformation movement, he and his writings were condemned by the Pope. It was not long after that, in 1520, that Luther first preached that the Pope was this Man of Lawlessness described by Paul. Now it is true that some Catholic scholars at the time pointed out how much Luther fit the bill, but the trend and momentum among Protestants was to widely accept the view that the Pope is this Man of Lawlessness, so stated in the Lutheran confessions and the Westminster Confession, as well as in the writings of Calvin and Zwingli. So deep is this doctrine in Protestant consciousness that many continue to this very day to view any Pope with automatic suspicion. There are two problems with this.

First, Luther is guilty of ignoring authorial intent and imposing the lens of his own experience onto the message of Paul. Scholar F.F. Bruce points out that neither the Jewish Christian apostles such as Paul, nor the Gentile Thessalonians, would have associated the humble house churches of the Christians with the Temple of God: In fact, the temple in Jerusalem was still standing. Second, the Roman government showed itself as being more than capable of restraint for good order on the one hand, and absolute caprice and blasphemy on the other. At the time of writing, the rule of the insane emperor Gaius Caligula who had tried to put a statue of himself in Jerusalem's temple was still a fresh memory. Emperor Claudius who succeeded him was much more tempered in his rule, much more "restrained." Thus for the first readers of this letter, the Man of Lawlessness was expected to come out of the secular political scene, not out of the Church.

Now that there is no Temple and the Church itself has such real and symbolic power in the world, I can see the argument that the Antichrist may be a major Church figure and that there may be an equivalence in meaning given our very different context: I also grant that a leading Protestant could be as valid a candidate as any Pope ever was, because we see that apostasy is sifting the Protestant churches today. And that is the second problem: We are too busy picking apart every statement the Pope makes, and not busy enough examining ourselves and repenting of our own sins and lawlessness.

When anyone, Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, or Pentecostal, starts thinking we have some kind of new vision or new interpretation that improves on the faith of the apostles, that is when we start linking ourselves to apostasy and to the doom of the Man of Lawlessness.

3. And So Be Saved

Of those who are duped by the Lawless One, Paul writes: “They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” As we said at the outset, differing points of view are a welcome reality to keep us humble and learning from each other. But truth is true, whatever the angle taken on it, and lies are lies, no matter where one hears them. The followers of Jesus Christ love the truth, believe the truth, and do not take delight in wickedness. Those who are duped now by the Spirit of Lawlessness already at work, and will be duped by the leader of the final rebellion against God, are those who despise the truth and, from their point of view, think that wickedness is delightful and just fine.

When a football game is over and the visiting team has triumphed over the home team, that remains true no matter if you were in the stadium at the fifty yard-line and could see everything, or you were in a corner of the end-zone bleachers and missed a lot of the action, or you were watching the game on television, or you did not even know or care that the game was

being played. The truth is the visiting team beat the home team. It is a lie to say that because you sat in the end-zone, from your point of view the home team won. It is a lie to say that because you don't care and didn't watch it for yourself, that the game therefore never happened.

Because our own nation was born in a rebellion-turned revolution, we tend to have romantic notions about rebellion; in fact, that is one of the appeals of *Star Wars* to the American consumer. The story the Bible tells, however, makes God supreme. The tyrants that try to rule by force and fear, are standing under God, and having been appointed to maintain social order, when they cast off their restraints they are actually rebelling against God. And this is what scholar F.F. Bruce believes may have been the thrust that Paul and the original Thessalonians would have understood; that the same government which acts as a restraint against chaos, can become the chief cause of chaos when it casts aside its own restraints. Rome would have called those restraints *jurisprudence*. Americans call our restraints the *Constitution*. Novelist Frank Poretti seems to understand the spiritual economy of the nations under God in this way in his novels *This Present Darkness* and *Piercing the Darkness*, when his angel hero speaks of the blessing of "another season of restraint."

Christians can rejoice for seasons of restraint in their land. And when those restraints are removed, Christians need to be on our knees.

Conclusion: Getting the Picture

If you would be saved, love the truth. To love the truth is to set our hearts on the faith that Jesus Christ imparted to the apostles. Yes, our point of view on the truth might be limited, but that does not justify turning our hearts over to lies.

For a puzzle that is in the box, each piece might not know exactly how it fits or what the big picture looks like, but each piece has a fit and the puzzle is incomplete without it. The

mistake is to mix up pieces from different puzzles, as though a piece from one puzzle fits into the solution of another. But that is what the Spirit of Lawlessness does; it introduces puzzle pieces that have no place in the bigger picture of salvation. The claim is that those pieces can be made to belong, you just have to patient with them; the claim is that the picture did not have all the pieces it needed; the claim is that it does not really matter how puzzles are put together, we are each in charge of our own puzzle and even if we have pieces from five different puzzles we can make a pretty collage. Those are lies: There is no satisfaction in trying to piece together a puzzle with pieces that do not belong; there is only frustration.

The truth of God fits together in the big picture of sin, holiness, mercy, and salvation. The apostles provide a consistent gospel of the power and love of God. Their doctrines are pieces to a puzzle that, put together, show us the image, the big picture, of Jesus Christ and the character of God. This is whom we love when we love the truth. Amen.