

# Minding Your Own Business

BY JOEL STEPHEN WILLIAMS

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians gives them ethical instruction to encourage them to advance in their new Christian lifestyle. Paul has already taught the Thessalonians how they "ought to live and to please God" (1 Thess. 4:1), and he now repeats and re-emphasizes the message he had spoken to them in person.

A life that was pleasing to God was a life of holiness, honor and purity (1 Thess. 4:1-8). It was God's will that they would be sanctified (1 Thess. 4:3), but purity was not the only thing that was to set the church in Thessalonica apart from their pagan neighbors. Love for others was another mark to identify them as believers (1 Thess. 4:9-12). As a part of loving others Paul writes, "We urge you ... to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly, toward outsiders and be dependent on no one" (1 Thess. 4:10-12). Our attention in this study will focus on Paul's command "to mind your own affairs."

One way not to show brotherly love would be to act as an idle busybody. They were to mind their own affairs, not the affairs of others. The idle busybodies were likely spending too much time on things they should not be doing and not enough time on what they should be doing. The result would be that they were interfering with the business of others and possibly causing an emotional and financial burden on others (2 Thess. 3:11). But Paul is probably not focusing here merely on those who anticipated an imminent return of the Lord and who had quit work. His teaching is more general than this specific problem.

The things that he expects of the church—leading a quiet life, minding your own business, being self-sufficient and so forth—are all quite familiar bits of advice from the moral philosophers of the first century. Paul was not merely responding to a crisis of non-working Christians, at least not in 1 Thessalonians. Speaking in general, then, Paul exhorts them "to mind your own affairs" (NRSV) or "to mind your own business" (RSV, NIV).

In the 1920s Harry Emerson Fosdick authored a series of articles for Ladies' Home Journal. These articles were published in book form under the title *Twelve Tests of Character*. According to Fosdick one test of character was whether or not people minded their own business. He argued that "All great religion sets men at life's central task of grappling with themselves." Dwight L. Moody said, "I have had more trouble with myself than with any other man I have ever met." Most of us would agree with Moody's experience. As Fosdick notes, "The ruination of most people is themselves," and he quotes Shakespeare for support.

While the Greek dramatists tended to blame mankind's problems on fate, Shakespeare attributed our failings to ourselves:

*The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings.*

Even though the major problem we encounter in our effort to live as we "ought to live" is ourselves, many people busy themselves with other people's business. We see it in employees who busy themselves with someone else's job while their own work suffers. We see it in students who are critical of the

work of other students when they may be guilty of the same mistakes, besides the fact that it is not their business. We see it in some parents who are generous in offering criticism to others about their unruly children when their own house may need cleaning. We see it in the focus and interest some people have on the lives of others, whether it is Hollywood celebrities, famous athletes or one's next-door-neighbor. We see it in the preacher who instructs others in righteousness when he himself may be a moral failure.

Yes, even devout Christians are not immune from this problem. For example, some preachers spend far too much time focusing on what other preachers and other churches are doing. Instead of a ministry with the preaching of Christ and him crucified as the centerpiece, they seem to focus on the perceived errors of others. Instead of "let me tell you how wonderful Jesus is," it is "let me tell you how bad some of my brothers are." Even without considering whether or not the accusations they hurl are true or not, their emphasis appears to be on minding the business of others.

As another example, consider the difference in genuine reformers who urge the church forward toward doctrinal and moral purity and the self-appointed watchdogs who focus on character assassination through yellow journalism or other unethical means. "A real reformer is a public blessing," Fosdick writes, "but his counterfeit is a hectic uplifter so zealous about saving the world at large that he himself, acrimonious, dogmatic, censorious, and altogether unlovable, has lost whatever persuasive beauty he might have

*continued on page 109*



- Do I arrange my schedule so that serving Jesus is a priority or do other matters take first place?
- Do I choose what is eternal over what is only temporary?
- Do I seek to place in my life the more important over the less important?
- Is listening and learning from Jesus more important than the many other things of this life?
- Do the things of this life distract me from studying Jesus' teaching and from assembling with fellow Christians to learn God's word?

### A Good Example

My mother was a Mary in many ways. Her house was not the neatest in the community but it was kept clean. She spent a minimum of time on the house so that she could do what was more important.

Mother wrote articles for "Christian Woman," taught women's Bible classes, helped those in need, visited members to encourage them, and attended all church services. She took time with her children by taking them on hikes, reading Bible stories and classical books to them, playing games with them, and including them in household chores. When her children played in the field where neighbor children came to play, she took a Bible story book to read between games. She may not have been perfect, but she kept her eyes on what was more important over the less important, the eternal over the temporary.

Are you a Martha or a Mary? The Lord needs more who seek first the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33) and keep their eyes on what is eternal (1 Cor. 4:18).

You may have a better home, be more organized, and have every detail handled perfectly, but when you let the less important in life crowd out the more important, the things of God, you are a Martha instead of a Mary.

they change churches it will solve their problem and gain salvation for them. This is wrong.

When a person by language or action puts the Lord's church, which consists of all the saved persons in the world, in the same category as any human institution, he does a great disservice to the cause of Christ. Even if he thinks of it as a divine institution, into which a person must come in order to get saved, he has perverted the Bible emphasis.

I did not "come into the church" in order to get saved, as if there were two steps in the process: first, coming into the church, then the result of that was salvation. Nor was I saved in order to be fit to join some church. I was saved and added to the church at the same time, and our language about the value of "changing churches" may hide that truth, for it usually leaves a person with a denominational concept of the church.

had." It is a mystery to me how some people, in the name of contending for the faith, can act in such unbecoming ways. The end result is often the situation described by Jesus where they are trying to remove a speck from the eyes of other people when a log is found in their own eyes (Mt. 7:1-5).

So let us all strive to mold our lives according to the ethical instruction of Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians. Let us try to live quietly and may we mind our own business.

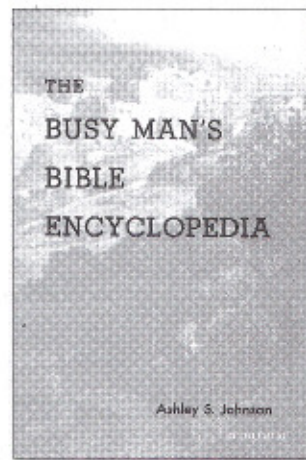
### SUBSCRIBERS

Send contributions of poetry and articles electronically for possible publication in the

Gospel Light to:  
gospellight@alltel.net.

## The Busy Man's Bible Encyclopedia

Ashley Johnson



Designed for those who have but little time to study. An "encyclopedia" in the sense of the comprehensiveness of its treatment of the Bible. Not an alphabetized dictionary-type volume, but a historical narrative.

**\$8.95** plus shipping/handling

Gospel Light Publishing  
PO Box 38  
Delight, AR 71940