

Message #6

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2 Thessalonians

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THE HEALTHY CHURCH AND WORK

2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-18

I.

In the last month I have had conversations with three different people about work situations where there were fellow employees who did not work very hard. Two of those situations involved government entities, and the third involved a fairly large private corporation. In each of those situations it was very difficult to have lazy employees fired. Earlier in my life I worked in a unionized manufacturing plant for several summers where I encountered a similar situation.

As a pastor I occasionally have people come to me looking for financial help. Especially when it involves people from outside the church, it is difficult to evaluate their situations. Are they hard working people who have simply encountered difficult circumstances, or are they lazy people who are simply looking for handouts--- and are perhaps making up stories? The Bible calls upon Christian people to be generous toward others, but how are we to look at people who do not carry their own weight?

The passage before us today tells us something about God's perspective on work and what our perspective should be and how we should treat people who don't work. We have come to the end of our study of the two letters to the Thessalonians. We have seen that the church that was established in this Greek city was a young congregation, but it was a healthy church. For it exhibited the virtues of faith, love and hope. At the same time we have seen from this second letter that the Thessalonians Christians were faced with three challenges. First, they were dealing with persecution for their faith. Second, they had a wrong understanding about the day of the Lord and the details of end time events. Third, from the passage before us we find that some of them had a wrong understanding about work.

I have rearranged the verses in our passage today in a way that makes more organizational sense to me. At least the organization that I have done fits into an outline that seems more "preachable" to me. So let's begin.

II.

In vv. 11 & 12 Paul seems to say that HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBERS WILL NOT BE SLUGGARDS. (II. HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBERS WILL NOT BE SLUGGARDS) According to v. 11, **"For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies."**

Somehow Paul got an update about the situation of the church at Thessalonica. Perhaps the report came from the same one who delivered 1 Thessalonians to the church there. Many suspect that this was Timothy. Perhaps the report came from someone else who had either visited Thessalonica or who was part of the church there.

The problem is that some of the Christians "walk in idleness." The original word has about it the idea of being out of line, or out of order. Someone is not fulfilling his or her responsibilities. The result, or presenting problem, is that they are not busy at work. Instead they are busy with being busybodies.

The ESV translation does a pretty good job of conveying the pun that is present in the original text. In Greek it is *meden ergazomenous alla periergazomenous*. Some are not busy at work but busy getting around work--- busy being busybodies.

Paul briefly addressed this situation in his first letter to the Thessalonians. In #4 vv. 11 & 12 (1 THESSALONIANS 4:11) he wrote, **"...and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, (1 THESSALONIANS 4:12) so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one."** Apparently the underlying problem has not gone away. So now he elaborates upon it.

Why were some of the Thessalonians walking in idleness and not busy at work? Most commentators suggest that it was because some of these Christians thought that the return of Christ was near at hand. Why work when the rapture of the church will happen at any moment? So these people sold everything, or many of their things. The rapture of the church and the day of the Lord had not yet come. So they were depending upon the financial support of others in the church. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The other scenario that makes sense to me has to do with the patronage system that existed in much of the Roman Empire. Many wealthy people had individuals who were part of their retinue. They were called clients. These people were not slaves or full time employees in the traditional sense. They were people who would do errands and help with certain projects. Typically the patrons would be involved with politics. So if there was some kind of rally or public event where the patron's interests would be involved, the clients would be called upon to give vocal support. In turn the patron would provide

certain protection for the client. He would provide food and/or money from time to time, and as needed.

These clients would sometimes make enough from this patronage system that they would get along without any other employment. So they had extra time on their hands. If these Christian clients had non-Christian patrons, then they might be called upon to support projects that did not reflect Christian values. If these clients now had people who were part of the church supporting them, then they were draining resources that could be put to other good uses. The Christian clients were not involved in very much productive labor.

What the exact cause of their situation was is perhaps not of crucial importance. The key thing is that there were people in the church at Thessalonica who were not involved in very much productive labor. They were not working very hard, and they were being busybodies. They were bothering other Christians who were working hard, and they were being a pain to the church as a whole.

The other factor that was at work in this first century environment was that most of the Romans and Greeks had a low view of manual labor. Scholars estimate that as many as a third of people in the Roman Empire were slaves. One philosopher called them "living tools." Even some professional and technical jobs were held by individuals who were technically slaves.

Cicero was a Roman politician and lawyer in the first century BC. He said that working daily for a livelihood was "**unbecoming to a gentleman**" and also declared, "**Vulgar are the means of livelihood of all hired workmen whom we pay for mere manual labor...**" One scholar (Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*) says, "**In ancient Athens at the time of the early church, one-third of the freemen sat daily in the court of the *Comitia* discussing the affairs of the state, while slaves performed all the manual labor that was loathed by the freemen.**"

Back in v. 12 of our text Paul writes, "**Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.**" I see hints here of the patron client relationship in that clients were expected to support the cause of their patron in guild hall meetings and civic assemblies. Today we might compare it to people who are paid to be protesters or who have some financial interest in political party activities.

Philo was a secular Jew who lived in Egypt during the time of Jesus and Paul. He wrote about this type of meddlesome person who did not lead a quiet life. He wrote, "**Besides, the worthless man whose life is one long restlessness haunts market-places, theatres, lawcourts, council-halls, assemblies, and every group and gathering of men; his tongue he lets loose for unmeasured, endless, indiscriminate talk, bringing chaos and confusion into everything, mixing true with false, fit with unfit, public with private,**

holy with profane, sensible with absurd, because he has not been trained to that silence which in season is most excellent. They keep their ears open in meddlesome curiosity." (De Abrahamo 20)

Unlike most Roman and Greek thinkers of the first century Jewish leaders valued work. Rabbis were required to have a trade. Paul was a leather worker and a tent maker. Jesus was a carpenter and builder. Christianity from its earliest times saw value in work. (PROJECTOR ON--- COLOSSIANS 3:23) Paul wrote in Colossians #3 v. 23, **"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men..."**

Most of you remember the story that I told several months ago about my friend Harry, who is a custodian for a public school system in Massachusetts. He sees his work as a ministry opportunity. So he works hard. When he was forced by circumstances beyond his control to leave one school system, teachers and students cried at his departure.

David Adeney is a missionary who has roots in China. In a book he wrote he describes the difference that Christians who work hard can make. He writes, **"In one area, farmers in a non-Christian village complained that the Christian villagers sang hymns and enjoyed themselves on Sundays, working only six days a week. However, the officials to whom they complained replied, 'You work seven days, they work six days, but they produce more. In your villages you have problems with theft and other crimes that are not found in the Christian village. So our conclusion is that six is better than seven.'"** (China: *The Church's Long March*, p. 142)

Healthy church members will not be sluggards. They will be hard workers. The Scriptures recognize that there are some who have disabilities and some who because of age are not able to work. The Bible also recognizes that a mom raising kids and a caregiver providing for one who needs care is also doing valuable work. Volunteerism is also work.

III.

We also find in our passage that HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBERS WILL SET A GOOD EXAMPLE OF HARD WORK. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBERS WILL...) We find that lesson coming out of vv. 7-9. In vv. 7 & 8 Paul writes, **"For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you."**

A couple of years ago we studied First Corinthians on Sunday morning. I pointed out at that time that cities in the Roman Empire did not have major sports teams. They did not have rock concerts and pop music stars that did concerts. But they did have these traveling speakers called "sophists," some of

whom acquired a large fan base. They were known for their rhetorical skills. Some were clearly motivated by financial gain in doing what they did.

Paul did not want to be mistaken for a sophist in places like Corinth and Thessalonica. So in both cities he refused to take money from the people among whom he worked. Some of the time he plied his trade as a leather worker to support himself. Thus in 1 Thessalonians #2 v. 9 (1 THESSALONIANS 2:9) we read, **"For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God."** Paul worked hard. He was a bivocational preacher.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul explained that Christian workers have a right to expect to be paid by the people among whom they minister. But he chose not to exercise that right. (1 CORINTHIANS 9:11) Thus in 1 Corinthians #9 he wrote, **"If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? (1 CORINTHIANS 9:12) If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ."**

So it is that Paul in v. 7 of our text appeals to his own example. Don't be idle. Don't be lazy. Don't be a sluggard. Follow my example of hard work. (PROJECTOR OFF) Seneca was a first century Roman philosopher. He wisely observed, **"...the living voice and intimacy of a common life will help you more than the written word. You must go to the scene of action, first, because men put more faith in their eyes than in their ears..."** (*Epistulae Morales* 6) In Paul the Christians of Thessalonica saw a good example of hard work. Partly because of that witness to the eyes he won a hearing for his message. So it will be with us.

In v. 9 he wrote, **"It is not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate."** So it is that we should set a good example of hard work to those around us. Such should especially be the case for us who are in vocational Christian ministry. We should never leave people with the impression that we do what we do because of money.

IV.

We also find in our passage that HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBERS WILL DISCIPLINE SLUGGARDS. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBERS WILL...) That concept is found in vv. 6, 10 and 13-15. In v. 6 Paul writes, **"Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us."**

Paul is making a strong exhortation, for which he is claiming the authority of Christ Himself. The exhortation is addressed not to the sluggards but to the diligent Christians in the church. The issue is the idleness, the out-of-line behavior of certain Christians. Whatever the cause might be, some in the congregation are not working and are being busybodies.

The required action is a social separation. This is intended to serve three purposes. First, it will free any Christian patrons who are supporting these people financially from their financial burden. Second, it will force the idle Christians to get to work if they wish to have the benefits that come from being part of the Christian community. Third, it will give the church a better testimony to the watching world.

The Christians at Thessalonica had already made a separation from the surrounding culture in becoming followers of Jesus. For this they became objects of persecution. Now to be shunned by the Christian community would put them in even a tougher position. This increased social pressure was intended to get them to behave correctly, to get to work.

Some cultures have a strong honor-shame ethic. Identity with the family and/or the group is a really big deal. In many Asian cultures this is especially the case. There is much pressure never to bring shame upon one's family. In Japan, up until recent times, it was the norm for people to work for one company for one's entire life. To change companies to get more money would be a shameful thing. There was much social pressure not to do that.

Our culture is not totally without honor and shame. But it is not such a big influence here. To change jobs is generally regarded as no big deal. So when churches try to exercise church discipline, it is often a more difficult task. Typically Christians who are the subject of an effort to exercise church discipline will just switch churches, or they will simply stop going to church services. But that does not excuse us as a churches from our Biblical responsibility to follow the directions of the Bible, including issues such as this.

Down in v. 10 Paul says, "**For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.**" Here is the basic principle. Work is a good thing. God is a working, creative God. In John #5 v. 17 (JOHN 5:17) we find this: "**But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is working until now, and I am working.'**" In His preface to Moses about the commandment to keep the Sabbath the Lord said (EXODUS 20:9), "**Six days you shall labor, and do all your work...**" The assumption is that people will work.

This responsibility to work is not the result of the Fall--- of the curse placed upon Adam and Eve and their descendants. Even in Eden Adam and Eve were given the responsibility to work. (GENESIS 2:15)

According to Genesis #2 v. 15, **"The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it."**

As Christians we tend to be kind and generous. The Bible has much to say about helping the poor and needy. (PROJECTOR OFF) There are some who are unable to work. They are physically unable to work, or jobs are unavailable. Here the issue is Christians who are unwilling to work.

Down in v. 13 the apostle adds, **"As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good."** Given the context Paul may be encouraging Christians not to give up on church discipline. It may be hard and stressful work. But churches should always do what is right.

It could also be that Paul is speaking to Christian patrons. He may be speaking to wealthier Christians in the congregation who have been well intentioned in helping out needy members, even those who are not working by choice. They should be tougher on the sluggards, but they should still be generous to those who are in genuine need.

In Galatians #6 (PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIANS 6:9) Paul wrote, **"And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. (GALATIANS 6:10) So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."**

Back in v. 14 of our passage Paul says (PROJECTOR OFF), **"If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed."** The first action to be taken with the sluggards is to note who they are. Keep in mind that Paul's letters were intended to be read before the congregation. Thus in 1 Thessalonians #5 v. 27 (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 THESSALONIANS 5:27) we saw Paul in an earlier lesson say, **"I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers."**

I can imagine that reading this second letter in front of the whole congregation would have put a certain pressure upon both the sluggards to get to work and the leaders to see that the behavior of these others changed. The short term goal was to shame the sluggards. But the ultimate purpose was to see that behavior was changed. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Then in v. 15 Paul says, **"Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."** So there is not to be a complete exclusion of the offending brother.

Jesus Himself told His disciples the basic procedure that His followers should use in dealing with sinning Christians. In Matthew #18 (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 18:15) Jesus is recorded as saying this: **"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (MATTHEW 18:16) But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. (MATTHEW 18:17) If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."**

Paul in our passage says that Christians should not treat the lazy brother like a Gentile and tax collector. The specifics of the treatment are not described for us by Paul. Some might understand Paul to be implying that the brothers in question should be excluded from the Lord's Supper. At the very least they should not be invited over for meals. They should not be treated like their behavior is acceptable.

Church discipline can be regarded as a continuum. We begin with sound teaching and Bible study. Then there is the value of a good example. Then there is admonition and warning, sometimes in a group setting. Then there is personal rebuke. Then there is bringing along two or three witnesses. When repentance still does not happen, there is telling it to the congregation. Then there is withdrawal of fellowship, with varying degrees of intensity. At the most serious level, following the example of Paul in 1 Corinthians #5, there is turning over someone to Satan.

V.

Finally, in vv. 16-18, we come to PAUL'S FAREWELL. (PROJECTOR ON--- V. PAUL'S FAREWELL) In v. 16 there is a prayer for peace: **"Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all."**

In v. 17 is Paul's salutation: **"I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in very letter of mine; it is the way I write."** It was typical for many in that era to dictate a letter. Paul signed this in his own hand. Apparently there were some at Thessalonica who would recognize that signature. Already there may have been forgers around who were claiming to have letters from Paul. It is possible that it was such a forgery that was involved in the report that the Thessalonians had received that the day of the Lord had already come.

In v. 18 is the benediction: **"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all."** Paul began with a wish for grace for them. He concludes with a wish for Christ's grace to be with them. It is grace that is the basis of the Christian life. **"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, that no one should boast."** (PROJECTOR OFF)

So a healthy church will be composed of people who are hard workers, in whatever situation they find themselves. Consider this final thought from John Stonestreet from "Breakpoint" (10/11/2013): **"We often tell young Christians that God wants them to 'follow their passions'--- a phrase that's only been around for a couple of generations--- so that we can all discover our special 'calling.'** In fact, I used to tell people that the key to discovering God's will is just discovering your passions.

"Now, there's certainly truth to the idea that the Lord has gifted us in unique ways to serve Him, and we can discover these gifts through our passions and use them for His glory. Remember how Olympian Eric Liddell 'felt God's pleasure' when he ran? But there's more to the biblical picture of calling and vocation than just this.

"Jesus also said we must pick up our cross and follow Him. Paul said that anyone who wishes to follow Christ will be persecuted. Remember, Eric Liddell died in a Japanese prison camp.

"It's really only Christians in the West, especially America, who have the luxury of dwelling on the question, 'What has God made me to be and what is my calling?' Unfortunately, in the process of this dwelling, we may miss other lessons about calling that our brothers and sisters around the world are forced to learn.

"The Protestant Reformers understood calling to be not primarily about passion, but as a commitment to glorify God in whatever station we find ourselves. It may be your calling right now to be a student, or a mom or a dad, or a minimum wage employee simply just having to make a living. Whether directly connected with our passions or not, God calls us first and foremost to do the next thing well, to His glory, with all of our might."