

Enduring Trials in Light of Jesus' Return: Working Night and Day

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

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*The Lord's Day Morning
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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to 2 Thessalonians chapter 3, verses 6 to 15. You'll see, if you're using the pew Bible, a page number for that passage, as we continue our way through the book of 2 Thessalonians together. This is the penultimate message on this little letter, the second to the last sermon, God willing. Next week we'll come to the final benediction in this letter, but today we come to a very interesting passage.

It's a passage in which Paul is addressing a problem that we met in the first letter that he wrote to the Thessalonians. In fact, if you'll keep your finger at 2 Thessalonians 3, you can probably turn back one page and look at 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verse 14. And among the exhortations that Paul gives in that one little verse is this one: "admonish the idle." You'll remember in 1 Thessalonians, as we were studying the theme of "Living Life in Light of Jesus' Return," we said that there were some people in Thessalonica who were expecting Jesus to return immediately so they quit work, they stopped working to support themselves and their families, they began meddling in other people's lives, and they depended upon the benevolence of better off Christians to feed them and take care of them. And in 1 Thessalonians Paul has said, "Don't do that. Work. Take care of yourself. Feed your family." Apparently that problem did not go away and it may well have gotten worse, because now that little phrase, "admonish the idle," is expanded to this section in chapter 3 verses 6 to 15 in 2 Thessalonians. In fact, Paul spends as much time on this issue as he does on the second coming in the second letter. So this is apparently a big problem in that congregation. That's the context of the passage we're about to look at.

Now the passage as we view it, just let your eyes look across verses 6 to 15, uses very strong language. In fact, he uses military language. Did you notice that three times in this passage the word "command" is used? In verse 6, "I command," or actually Paul says, "We command." In verse 10, "We command." In verse 12, "We command." It's the language that a general would use in order officers to do this or to do that in an army. So there's military directive. And this shows Paul's apostolic authority; he has the authority to command in the church.

Now though there is this strong military language, there is also pastoral and brotherly language in this passage. Did you notice how many times the word “brothers” or “brother” is used in this short span? In verse 6, even though he's commanding them, he addresses the Thessalonians as brothers. In verse 13, even though he is exhorting weary believers in the congregation, he addresses them as brothers. And then in verse 15, even though he is rebuking delinquent members of the congregation, he addresses them as a brother. And so there is brotherly language here.

And we see a pastoral tone to what Paul says as well. Paul, in this passage, is wanting to bring to bear the Word of God on the life in the community of the Thessalonian Christians. And he does this in two ways. One is he emphasizes his teaching. You'll see him do this in verse 6. He says, “These people are walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.” In other words, their idleness is a way of living that contradicted the teaching that he had previously given to them. Just like we had already seen in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, he had said, “Don't be idle. Work.” So their idleness was a contradiction of his teaching and he wants to see faithful, Biblical teaching at work in the life of a congregation. But he not only wants his teaching to be honored in the congregation, he points to his own example. And he does this several times.

Look for instance at verse 7. In verse 7, he said, “Imitate us. We weren't idle among you. Don't you be idle.” So he gives his own example. And he does it again in verse 9. He said, “We worked hard in order to give you an example in ourselves.” So Paul wants the Word of God to reign in the life of the congregation and so he points to his teaching but he also points to his example. And there you see the pastoral side. He's not just commanding. He's saying, “By the way, I'm not just telling you to do this, you can look at my example. I've done it myself; this is the way I've lived. I'm not asking you to do something that I've not done myself or that I'm not prepared to do myself. I'm going to be right in there with you doing the very same thing just like I have in the past.” So as we said, Paul is addressing a group of people within the Christian congregation who have quit working because they're waiting for the immediate return of Jesus and they're living off of the largess of the other Christians, while no doubt at the same time, thinking themselves spiritually superior. You know, “We're more spiritual; we're waiting for Jesus' return. But by the way, would you feed me supper tonight?” And the apostle Paul is rebuking that kind of laziness, that unwillingness to work, that spiritualizing of laziness, and he's urging them to work hard. That's the context of the passage before us.

Now, Paul has a series of specific exhortations in this passage that begin in verse 10. Let me identify them for you. Before we read the passage, I want you to be able to be on the lookout for them. In verse 10 he gives his first exhortation, then in verse 12 he gives his second exhortation, in verse 13 he gives his third exhortation, and in verse 14 he gives his fourth exhortation. Now you could

number these differently. You could put the first two together, but we'll just number them this way. Let me tell you what they are; be on the lookout for them. The first thing that Paul says is if you are unwilling to work, you should be prepared to go without eating. Just look at what he says. He says, "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat," verse 10. And it's interesting, the commentators have looked at Greek literature and Hebrew literature and they've tried to find that little dictum, that little word poem. And they can't find something exactly like it, and some of them think that Paul may have actually made up the saying, but it definitely reflects teaching that you find in the book of Proverbs that a person ought to live off of what he works for or she works for. Paul puts it in the negative. "If you don't work, you should also be prepared not to eat." That's the first thing that he says.

Then, the second exhortation that goes along with it is, "We ought to work quietly and earn our own living." And you see that in verse 12. "Do their work quietly to earn their own living." Then the third exhortation you'll see down in verse 13 and it's an exhortation not to the people who are idle but to the whole congregation. And the exhortation is, "Do not grow weary in doing good." And then the fourth exhortation that he gives is in verse 14, that the congregation as a whole is not to encourage or enable or associate with those who disobey Paul's teaching, Biblical teaching, on this particular point. "Take note of that person and have nothing to do with him that he may be ashamed." So as we work through this passage, this is what Paul is addressing — people who are idle, waiting for Jesus' immediate return, and sort of scything off other people in the congregation. And Paul's addressing that issue.

Now you may be saying, "Well there's nobody at First Presbyterian Church in Jackson that's doing that." I think you're probably right. I don't know of anybody at First Presbyterian Church at Jackson who has quit work because you think that Jesus is coming in the next few days and you're expecting everybody else to feed you. But there are still general applications from this passage for every single one of us, because what Paul is doing here is he's working from general principles of the Christian life to apply them to this specific situation. And guess what? Those general principles still apply to us. So we're going to give attention to those as we study this passage together today. Before we read God's Word, let's pray and ask for His help and blessing.

Heavenly Father, this is Your Word and we ask that You would, by Your Spirit, apply it to our hearts and grant us growth in grace in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, amen.

This is the Word of God. Hear it:

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. 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. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. 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. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

Now what in the world can 21st century Christians learn from a passage written almost two thousand years ago to a group of people, some of whom had quit work because they thought Jesus might be coming in the next few days, and were depending upon the care of others in the congregation who were working? What could that kind of a passage say to us about how to live the Christian life today? And the answer is: a lot! There are three things in particular that I want to show you from this passage.

THE WORD OF GOD IS TO BE OBEYED IN THE CHURCH

And the first thing that Paul makes very clear is that he expects the Word of God to be obeyed in the church. He expects the Word of God to be obeyed in the church. He wants you to be deliberately committed to obeying the Word of God as Christians and as a congregation in the church. And I want to emphasize two or three things here. First of all, Paul uses the words "command" and even the word "obey" repeatedly in this passage. There are many Christians today, well meaning Christians, who think that if you believe in grace there's no room left for obedience and duty in the Christian life. Clearly, the apostle Paul did not think that. He both preached grace and he emphasized obedience. The important thing is to understand where obedience fits in the Christian life. Christians do not believe that we obey to get God to love us. We do not believe that we obey in order to save ourselves, nor do we believe that we obey in order to contribute something to our salvation which is lacking in what is provided by God's grace.

We believe that salvation is by grace alone in Christ alone by faith alone. We believe that the way that a person is brought into an eternal fellowship with the living God is by believing the Gospel. When the Gospel is proclaimed, "For God

so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes on Him will not perish but have everlasting life,” when that Gospel is proclaimed and a person believes on that Gospel, they believe that God has done what must be done in order for me to be made right with Him, that person is saved and that belief does not make God love us, it is the result of God's love to us. As John said, “We love because He first loved us.” So for Christians, salvation is all of grace, and yet there is an important place for obedience in the Christian life. Where is that place? It is in the acknowledgement of Jesus our Lord. We do not obey in order to save ourselves. When we obey, we are acknowledging that Jesus is our Lord; our Savior is our Lord. We are His disciples. We are His followers. We want to be like Him. And the apostle Paul expects the Word of God to be obeyed in this congregation. That's the first thing that I want you to see.

And the second thing is this. Paul makes it clear that the Word of God is to be obeyed in two ways. He emphasizes his teaching and he emphasizes his example. First of all he emphasizes the importance of his teaching. Look at verse 6 - “Not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.” Paul is talking about what he has already written to them and preached to them and taught to them before. He's already told them that Christians aren't lazy; Christians aren't idle. Christians work; Christians don't unwillingly engage in work or willingly reject work. They embrace work to care for themselves in faithfulness to God to give Him glory. Work is a glorious thing. It's a creation mandate. The toil in work is a result of the fall but work is a wonderful thing. There's nothing better than to work hard at something worth doing in life. And the apostle Paul has emphasized that in his teaching and so he's saying, “I want that teaching about work to hold sway in the life of this congregation. I want us to view labor as a good thing; work as a spiritual thing. You're not more spiritual if you reject work and wait for Jesus, you're less spiritual!” And so Paul is saying, “I want a Biblical understanding of work that goes all the way back to Moses and Genesis 1 and 2. I want that teaching to hold sway in this congregation.”

But notice what he also does. He says, “And friends, I'm not telling you to do something that I haven't done.” He points out his own practice. And look at how he does it. He says this, “You yourselves know how you ought to imitate us,” verse 7, “because we were not idle when we were with you. We didn't 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.” He's saying, “I don't want you to be a burden to anybody in the congregation, and guess what? I wasn't a burden to any one of you.” Now Paul, here and in 1 Timothy and in 1 Corinthians 9, makes it clear that the normal pattern is for congregations to support their pastor. But there were cases like this one where Paul supported himself and did not receive support from the people that he was ministering to. And apparently in this case, it's because he saw in this congregation that there were people that had a tendency to laziness and he did not want to give them an excuse for that. He wanted to give them an example of hard work. And so he's saying to them, “When I tell you, ‘Work hard. Feed yourself. Don't be a burden to other people,’”

he said, "I did the same thing when I was ministering to you. I'm not asking you to do something that I've not already done."

Many of you had to read *The Canterbury Tales* when you were in high school. Maybe you did it as part of an AP English class or maybe you did it in a freshman English class in college. Or maybe you even had to memorize parts of the prologue. I had to memorize parts of the prologue. Mrs. Sarah Payne, my eleventh grade English teacher, told me that I was going to memorize that prologue in Middle English and I was going to say it in front of the whole class. It's a wonderful prologue, but in that prologue you may remember he describes different pilgrims that are on their way to Canterbury and most of the clergymen don't come off looking very good. But the poor country parson is clearly respected by Chaucer. And he says this about the poor country parson. He says, "But Christ's love and His apostles twelve he taught, and first he followed it himself." In other words, he taught them about Christ's love but first he showed them Christ's love in the way that he lived. In other words, the poor country parson practiced what he preached. And that is exactly what Paul is saying to the Thessalonians. He said, "I am practicing what I am preaching to you and I want the Word of God to reign in this congregation about the issue of work. We need to embrace that same thing in our own day and time. There is a loss of an understanding in our culture of the sacred value of work and we as Christians ought to be the first ones to be an example of working hard to glorify our God in accordance with the Word of God. That's the first thing that I want us to see from this passage.

DO NOT GROW WEARY IN DOING GOOD

The second thing is this. We learn in this passage not to grow weary in doing good. Now if you'll look in verse 13 where Paul says that, "Brothers, do not grow weary in doing good," Paul is clearly speaking to a specific situation. The specific situation is this. The majority of the congregation seems to have been discouraged by this minority that has stopped working and is depending on them to take care of them. And they're kind of throwing up their hands in frustration and saying, "You know, I've had enough of this." And Paul is turning to them and saying, "No, no, no. I know it's frustrating what you're dealing with. I've had to write to you twice about this. It's frustrating to me too, but do not grow weary in doing good." Now this is not the only time that Paul gives this exhortation in the Bible. If you look, for instance, at 2 Corinthians chapter 13 verse 7, Paul speaks to the Corinthians about doing the good. In Galatians 6:9 he speaks about doing the good or well doing and he says, "Let us not grow weary in well doing." It's a very similar phrase to the one that he uses here in 2 Thessalonians. In Romans 7:21 he refers to "the one who would do the good." This is a common saying for the apostle Paul, but he's saying it to the Thessalonians because he knows that they may be discouraged themselves because they've got people in their midst that aren't doing what Paul has taught them to do.

And it's easy to understand how that happens. You know when you're trying to live the Christian life and there are people around you, even in your own congregation, who are not living in accord with the Bible, what does it do? Does it encourage you? No, it discourages you. Does it give a boost to your faith? No, it can make you cynical. You're trying to live the Christian life and there's somebody who makes a profession of faith in Christ and they're not living in accord with Christianity. It discourages you. And so Paul turns to the majority of Christians in the congregation and he says, "Don't grow weary in well doing. Don't give up. Don't stop. Keep on doing what you're doing. Don't be discouraged by what's going on around you."

You know, there are probably a lot of you who have been discouraged this week. You know, on Tuesday and Wednesday I was doing a lot of reflection on what kind of a culture I now live in. No matter what your political persuasion is, if you're a Christian, whether you're a Democrat or a Republican or a Libertarian or an Independent, you have to be looking at our country this week and say, "You know, the culture's not with us anymore." When you look at the redefinitions of traditional marriage that were adopted in states across our country, the legalization of recreational drugs, the ballot measures to approve physician assisted suicide, and more, you have to be saying to yourselves, "My grandparents would not have recognized this place." And you have to be saying to yourself, "The culture isn't moving my direction right now." And you know what your temptation to do is in that setting? Throw up your hands and say, "I give up." But do you know what Paul's saying to you this morning? "Do not grow weary in well doing. Now is the time where we need Christians that will stand for the truth of God's Word more than ever. Do not grow weary in well doing, Christian!"

DO NOT CONDONE, APPROVE, OR ENABLE THOSE WHO ARE NOT DOING GOOD

And there's a third thing I want you to see in this passage as well. And you see it at the very end in verse 14 where Paul says this. Paul says, "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." Now what's Paul saying there? Paul is saying, "Do not condone, approve, or enable those who are not doing good. Don't condone, approve, or enable those who are not doing good." You know very often when we think about discipline in the church we think of what the elders are supposed to do or what the preachers are supposed to do or what we don't want them to do or whatever else. We think about the obligation of the officers. But here, Paul is speaking to the whole congregation and he's saying this. "If there are people in your church that continue to be idle when I've told them not to be idle, don't condone that; don't approve that. Don't enable that; don't even associate with them. You have an active part to play in the mutual accountability of the local church. It's not just up to the elders and the pastors. It's

up to you.” And Paul says that is one of the ways that some people are brought to repentance. I've seen it happen in this congregation. I've seen men in this congregation go and confront other men in this congregation and say, “Brother, you are not living like a Christian.” I've seen women in this congregation say lovingly but firmly to their sisters in Christ, “You’re not living like a Christian.” And I've seen those things used to bring people back from acting in a way that is out of accord with God's Word.

Now Paul is saying, “Don't condone, don't enable, don't approve of those who are going against God's Word.” And yet look at the very end. He says, “Don't treat them, don't treat them as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.” Isn't that interesting? These are people that are acting out of accord with God's Word but Paul still wants to win them back. There's this pastoral tone. There's a desire for reconciliation, a desire for reclamation. These people in Thessalonica are doing some crazy things but he still wants to win them back. This passage has a lot to say to us in the 21st century as believers. May God, by His grace, apply it to our own hearts and to our own congregation. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word. Thank You for the privilege of studying it together. Bless it to our spiritual nourishment and to Your glory, in Jesus' name, amen.

Now Anna Waring's hymn, “Father, I Know That All My Life,” is one of my favorite hymns. If you'll turn to number 559, she has us sing about living a quiet life of godliness, picking up on the themes of this passage.

Receive now God's blessing.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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