

Thessalonians, Part 17: The Believer's Work

2 Thessalonians 3:6 ESV (Pg. 575) 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. **7** For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, **8** 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. **9** It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. **10** For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. **11** For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. **12** Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. **13** As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. **14** 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. **15** Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. **16** Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all. **17** I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. **18** The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

- I. After 17 Weeks, we've come to the end of the Thessalonian letters. The 2nd letter was sent to comfort and instruct the church because misunderstandings with the teachings about Jesus' return. It seems the Thessalonians had been victimized by false prophetic words, and even a forged letter, leading them to believe Jesus had already returned, and the persecution they were experiencing was part of a post-apocalyptic judgement, meaning their repentance and belief had profited nothing.
 - A. But reminded them of what he taught while he was with them and in his letter. He encouraged them to hold to the teaching and traditions they'd been given.
 1. Paul gives them assurance of this letter's authenticity when he states "**I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.**" Everything he told them has come directly from his own heart.
 2. Paul opened these letters by saying "Grace to you and peace"¹. He will end this letter with another reminder of grace, the source of all their hope and endurance, saying, "**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all**".
 - B. But before he signs off, there's one more pressing issue in the church that jeopardizes their corporate peace and gospel success. If Paul was writing in our time, culture, or even our church, we might think he should simply ignore the problem, but Paul can't. It is that many in their congregation are *idle*.
 1. "**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.**"
 - a) Paul's apostolic authority is divine "we **command** you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ". He is acting on Christ's behalf, and in his authority!
 - b) Paul says the idle are not walking "in accord with the tradition that you received from us". "The tradition" refers to the Word of God; both Old Testament revelation, relayed by Paul and his own apostolic revelation.

2. Those who are holding to the traditions should keep away from the idle who are corrupting the church's efforts and their testimony of transformed lives.
 - a) There are many other Bible passages calling the church to discipline members when they stray from righteousness, or don't embrace truth².
 - b) "Keep away" means that members of the body should participate in the discipline of the wayward people by disassociating with them.
- C. Verse 14 tells us "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." Some people want only pastors to step in when someone brings reproach on the gospel. Church leaders must lead in discipline, but Paul seems to be saying that **everyone** in the church must be unified in dealing with unrepentant saints.
 1. This principle is found in the Old Testament. In the law, when someone blasphemed God, the entire congregation was commanded by God to stone the guilty person. They wouldn't tolerate the desecration of God's holiness³.
 2. So Paul calls for the church to be united in its response to sin, as he did with the Corinthians⁴. Great peril is produced by well-meaning people who try to comfort those too readily or quickly who are being lovingly disciplined.
- D. Sometimes we don't support church discipline because of a warped understanding of grace, or a fear of being judgmental. But grace without repentance doesn't produce a transformed life. It is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace". It is a powerless mockery of true grace.
 1. But didn't Jesus say **Matthew 7:1 ESV "Judge not, that you be not judged."**? Yes. But he was speaking of using ourselves as the standard of righteousness; instead of himself, or the requirements of God's word.
 2. Repeatedly in scripture we are told to judge unrighteous behavior⁵ in others, to judge spirits and even alleged spiritual gifts⁶, and even to judge ourselves⁷. Judgement is only sinful when it is proud, thinking we're superior because of something in ourselves, and not holy because of Jesus' grace.
- E. Furthermore, church discipline is never so that someone will be condemned. It is designed to wake someone up from error, with a desire for restoration.
 1. Paul says "that he may be ashamed"; not "so he'll wallow in shame", but so that he will regret how he has roamed from the truth, and come home, like the prodigal son. Paul describes the difference well in 2 Corinthians...
 2. **2 Corinthians 7:10 ESV For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. 11 For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter.** "Punishment" here speaks of the internal agony they experienced while as they desired to be restored to fellowship.
- F. Paul made sure that the Thessalonians kept redemption in mind "**Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.**" They were to disassociate, yet leave their hearts open to the possibility that God would call them home.
- II. This idleness was a big deal, and Paul was confident in his correction of their sinful behavior because he had both taught and demonstrated for the church what was

expected of them. “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.”

A. Paul says that they were given a pattern to imitate of how the godly approach their work. There were two key points he makes about their example:

1. First, Paul wasn't idle, rolling into town expecting to be waited on hand and foot. Instead, “with toil and labor” they “worked night and day” (probably doing their secular business in the day, and their church business at night).
 - a) All believers must be diligent. No one is elite in the kingdom; and there's nothing disgraceful or demeaning in honest work. The opposite is true.
 - b) Christians should be the hardest workers and be content without complaining. If you are unwilling to work hardest, don't call yourself a Christian at work. Sloppy work is worse than open sin in many cases.
 - c) Interestingly, Paul says he had the “right” not to do secular work because of his missionary work (a point he makes in other places in the New Testament). But he was willing to work outside the church in order to give them an example to imitate. A godly leader will always elevate the needs of the flock above any rights he could demand because of his position.
2. Next, they earned what they consumed. Monks of old would take a vow of poverty and then go through villages begging alms and dishonoring Christ.
 - a) As Christians, we support ourselves by hard work. While we support those who are not able-bodied, everyone should provide for themselves in accordance with their skills and abilities. No Christian should ever mooch off of others, whether family, friends, church, or government.
 - b) Don't misunderstand, everyone needs help every once in a while, and you shouldn't let your pride keep you from humbly receiving what you need. But I'm saying that a lifestyle of letting others support you is sinful.
 - c) “For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.” I've found that hunger is one of God's greatest motivators to make us industrious in our work!

B. “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.”

1. Paul uses a “play on words” in the Greek, saying they are not busy, but they are busybodies! His point is that these people weren't just lazy, sitting around in their underwear eating Cheetos and watching Spongebob all day! They were causing trouble with all their free time.
 - a) They were depleting the time and resources of the other members of the body, and may have been the source of the false teaching.
 - b) Meddlers have to occupy their time doing something! “An idle person tempts the devil to tempt him and from this fruitful root has sprung all the wickedness and miseries of mankind”⁸ Richard Kingston.

2. In pastoral form, he both commands and encourages the idlers. Anyone can command someone who is troublesome and harmful. But Paul, recognizing brothers, encourages them. Sometimes bad behavior is because people don't believe they can do better, and no one ever called on them to do so.
 3. And his encouragement (and command) is that they find work, do it quietly (meaning faithfully without drama or complaint), and to have the satisfaction of knowing that they provided for themselves to the glory of God.
- C. Paul has instructions for the others: **“As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good”**. When you see people getting away with not maintaining their integrity, it's easy to say “what's the point?” But Christians should always continue doing the right thing, not **if** it gets hard, but **when** it inevitably does.
1. **Galatians 6:9 ESV** **And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.**
 2. Do what you do heartily, as though you are working for the Lord (because you are!). There will be reward; if not in this life, certainly in the one to come.
- III. Almost everyone here has a job or is trying to get one. The majority of you work very hard. So why preach a sermon on idleness? It's because (as I've said already), our working often says more about us than our morality or religious activities.
- A. Growing up, hard work wasn't expected, appreciated, or rewarded. My parents expected very little of me academically or otherwise productively. In short, by the time I became a Christian at 16, I was a bum and mooched off everyone!
1. Somehow I got a job as a DJ at a Christian radio station after I was saved. I worked graveyard, and we mostly played preachers during those hours. So I goofed off with my friends or listened to music while the sermons droned on.
 2. After about 3 years I wanted to take a quick trip with my buddies. So I told my boss I couldn't come in for a few days. He said if I didn't come in, don't bother coming back! He actually had the nerve to expect me to do my job!
 - a) So I quit. But I found that money doesn't automatically replenish. I didn't have a job and couldn't find one. It seemed no one wanted to hire an experienced DJ who quit his job in anger in a depressed economy!
 - b) So I was broke. I couldn't do things with my friends, I had no car, no skills, and diminishing self-esteem. Worst of all, I had to return home!
 3. During that time, the Lord convicted me. Much of my Christian life had been spiritual, but not practical. So I repented and told God that if he gave me a job I would work there faithfully until he moved me somewhere else.
- B. The next morning I went wherever I could within walking distance to get a job. The 2nd place hired me on the spot...Long John Silvers. I was a cook. I went home at night covered in grease and smelling like fish. God was REALLY working character into me in unpleasant ways!
1. But I remembered my promise and through myself into my job. I volunteered to clean dead pigeons off the roof and play Santa Claus on the main drag. I worked extra shifts so my co-workers could be off, all for God's glory!
 2. I was able to buy a car and get back into my own place. I also began to rise in the ranks of our store. Man, was I happy to be promoted off that fryer!

- C. About a year later, my friend came into our store and told me the overnight delivery company he worked for needed someone ASAP. I wound up taking the job and doubled my income. I worked there about a year. But there's more ...
1. The company had guaranteed some corporate clients delivery by 10:00am. But sometimes our plane wouldn't land until after 10. My bosses wanted me to "cook the books" to show the the deliveries were on time. But I wouldn't do it. My boss angrily told to me to comply with the scheme or be fired.
 - a) This was very stressful! I went to our church that night and prayed that God would help me to retain my integrity and not lose income. I had just gotten married, and I certainly didn't want to be out of work!
 - b) The very next day I was delivering to Exxon's corporate offices in Midland. One of the guys in the mailroom had to move, and was hoping to find his own replacement! Would I be interested? You bet I was!
 2. If memory serves me correctly, I started within a day or two and got another significant raise. I stayed there several years until I was hired from within by an outsourcing company (another raise!) and was able to move to Lubbock.
- D. I realized through all these experiences that my work, and my attitude towards it, really mattered to God. I learned the way I approach my work was a great way to show the world what Christ had done in me. I learned that the way I work opens doors to share the gospel.
1. At Long John Silver's I learned that when we do our most unflattering work as unto the Lord, he is watching and takes care of his own.
 2. I learned at the delivery company the importance of honoring the giver of the blessing, even if it means you could lose the blessing.
 3. At Exxon I learned with David that **Psalm 37:25 ESV I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread.**
- IV. Our work matters to God. Most of us will go to work tomorrow. Will you go with a heart of thanksgiving for God's good provision for you, or will you complain about every inequity that you perceive? Will you work as unto the Lord (your real boss), or will you "mail it in", doing just enough to stay under the radar and get by? Will you fret about job security, or trust that the God who clothes flowers and feeds birds is taking care of you as well? Will you scheme and play the system, or will you find something productive to do (even if you have limitations) to the glory of God?

Benediction: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." (Numbers 6:24-26)

¹ 1 Thessalonians 1:1

² Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:3-4, 11-13; Titus 1:13, 3:10

³ See Leviticus 24:10-16 and Numbers 15:32-36

⁴ 1 Corinthians 5 tells the how Paul instructed the entire church to deal with an incestuous member.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 5:12-13; Ephesians 5:11; 1 Timothy 1:20 et al.

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22; 1 John 4:1-6, et al.

⁷ Matthew 7:3-5; Romans 12:3; 1 Corinthians 10:12, 11:28-32; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 6:3-5; et al.

⁸ From: *Apophthegmata Curiosa: Or, Reflections, Sentences, and Maxims, Historical, Moral, Philological and Divine. Being a Summary Collection, of Solid, Useful, and Necessary Cautions, Instructions and Rules, for the Conduct of Human Life ... Extracted from the Most Celebrated Authors, Ancient and Modern*; Pg 57; by Richard Kingston; 1709