

Work: A Christian Duty
2 Thessalonians 3:6-15
Part Four

In this particular passage of Scripture, Paul is addressing a very specific problem that had arisen in the church at Thessalonica. Apparently there were certain believers who had chosen to be idle. Rather than working with their hands in order to supply for themselves and the needs of their families they were depending upon others.

These particular Thessalonians had lost their way. Rather than understanding the value of work and its importance in a holy walk, they were treating work as if it served no good purpose. Paul, in an attempt to get them back to work, gives to the Thessalonian church a series of incentives.

The first incentive that he gave was the threat of church discipline. Look at **V. 6**, **“Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.”** Paul is instructing these believers to “keep aloof” or in other words to “withdraw from” any brother “who leads an unruly life” or in other words from those brothers who had chosen not to work. Why should certain Thessalonians get back to work? The first incentive Paul gives is that of church discipline. If you don’t get back to work you will be disciplined.

The second incentive Paul gave was his own example. Look at **VV. 7-9**, **“For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, (8) nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you; (9) not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, that you might follow our example.** Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his example. While certain Thessalonians got up in the morning without any intent to labor with their hands, this was not the case for Paul and his companions. While these certain Thessalonians were casually moving through their day, they had the opportunity to watch the Apostle Paul and his companions laboring. This example certainly should have provided these young believers who had chosen to be idle, the motivation to get off their duffs.

The third incentive is personal provision. Look at **V. 10**, **“For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat.”** If certain Thessalonians chose to remain idle, Paul gives very clear instruction that no assistance should be given to them. Even if that meant denying them what was necessary to meet their basic needs such as for food.

The Lord expects us, if possible, to conduct ourselves in such a way that we would not become dependent upon others. And therefore the Apostle Paul makes it very clear to these Thessalonians that they needed to conduct themselves appropriately and to get to work.

It is true that the Lord tells us very clearly that we are to **“give to him who asks.”** We saw this

last week in **Matthew 5:42** but this does not mean that we are to do so indiscriminately. This is clear to us in this passage that we have just read. Paul expected people to work and take care of their own needs, and perhaps if possible even the needs of others. Those who were able to work were expected to work. The Scriptures have never indicated that people should be fed if they are unwilling to work. We see this clearly in the Old Testament.

Exodus 23:10-11 says, “**And you shall sow your land for six years and gather in its yield, (11) but on the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the needy of your people may eat; and whatever they leave the beast of the field may eat. You are to do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.**” Because of these instructions to the nation of Israel it meant that there would always be food available for the poor. Whatever fruit that might be spontaneously produced in those fields that were being rested was to be made available to those in need. All they had to do in order to eat was to be willing to work.

Deuteronomy 24:19-21 states, “**When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. (20) When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. (21) When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow.**” We have an almond tree that hangs over our fence that our neighbor allows us to harvest. One thing I know very well is the fact that the first time you go over the tree to get the almonds you will not nearly get all the almonds that are available. There will be a substantial number of almonds left on that tree. The same thing was true of the fields, the orchards, and vineyards in Palestine. This less than thorough harvesting provided additional food for the poor to glean beyond what they might find in fields that were being rested. In addition to this we read the following.

Leviticus 19:9, “**Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. (10) Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the Lord your God.**” Certain fields were being rested and that would be the source of food, those fields that were being actively harvested would be harvested in a certain way. The vast majority of the field would be harvested but not thoroughly harvested as we saw in **Deuteronomy 24:19-21** and remaining part of the field near the corners would not be harvested at all as we see here in **Leviticus 19:9**.

If the poor who were able to work were unwilling to do so, then they would not eat. Food was not brought to the poor. The poor had to go out into the fields and harvest whatever they could find that was purposefully left for those who were willing to come and gather it.

I am sure you remember the story of Ruth. The story begins with Naomi leaving Judah with her husband Elimelech and their two sons during a famine to live in the land of Moab. While there, the two sons married and one of those sons married a woman named Ruth. After a period of time Naomi's husband and two sons died. Naomi was now a widow and she and her daughter-in-law

Ruth left Moab to return back to Judah.

Now consider this situation, two women by themselves and poor. Naomi was most likely elderly and unable to work. Though Ruth was younger, she was a foreigner. What happened? How were their needs going to be met? Ruth asked for permission to go into the fields and to pick up what was left in the fields after they had been harvested. And of course you know that she ended up in the field of Boaz.

How did it work out for her? Extremely well. She was gleaning in the field after the reapers which was granted to her under Jewish law. She worked from sun up to sundown. While doing this she was noticed by a man named Boaz who invited her to come back and to continue to glean in his fields. And she continued to do this day in and day out. Sun up to sun down. Boaz even asked that the reapers would make sure she would be generously rewarded for her efforts. But he never interfered with her work. He never said to her just go home and we will bring to you whatever you need.

The Scriptures have always insisted upon people being willing to work. The Scriptures never encourage food to be given to people who are not doing the things necessary to take care of themselves and therefore we should not.

If people come to you and ask you for help and you know that these people are individuals that have done nothing to bring this condition on themselves through their own irresponsibility, then certainly we have the responsibility to help. What does the Scripture teach us? We are to **“give to him who asks of us.”** But if you believe that this person is presently living an irresponsible lifestyle then you have no biblical obligation to help.

Certainly this is easy to apply if you know the person, but what happens if you don't know the person? I would suggest that you invite them to our church. Encourage them to come into fellowship. Did you know that we have food available for people in our congregation who have need of food? It is called a food pantry.

Let me ask you a question. Why would we want them to come into our congregation? Because then we can get to know them. We will be able to determine whether or not a person is living responsibly and has a willingness to work or not. But someone might say, “But they might not be willing to come.” What would be our response to that comment? “They will if they get hungry enough.”

And besides, if the poor Israelites are willing to walk to the fields in order to acquire food through hard labor it doesn't seem to much to ask people, if necessary, to walk to church in order for them to become known by the people of our church. Does this mean that they have to be in our fellowship a year before they receive help? Of course not! They will immediately be supplied with the food they need. And they will continually receive food as long as they prove themselves to be willing to work.

I want to make this perfectly clear. I am not talking about a past lifestyle but rather a present

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lifestyle. Just because someone may have lived irresponsibly in the past does not mean that they are continuing to do so. In fact there may be individuals in this congregation who in the past have behaved badly, but have learned important lessons from past transgressions. If this is the case, praise the Lord!

Knowing people is extremely important if we are going to be able to apply biblical truths correctly. This is true both in terms of discerning whether or not there is genuine need or if the need has been brought about by their own irresponsibility. We should not make it a practice to ship the resources that God has entrusted to us to people, or even nations if there is not some assurance that those resources will be distributed responsibly.

Consider the apostle Paul. Remember **Galatians 2:9-10**. When Paul was encouraged by the apostles to remember the poor, he said that he was eager to do it. Who did the apostles have in mind when he was talking about the poor? Clearly it was for the poor within the church in Jerusalem. Look at **Acts 11:27-30**, “**Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. (28) And one of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. (29) And in proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. (30) And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the Elders.** We cannot be faithful to the clear teachings of God’s Word and carelessly be throwing God’s resources indiscriminately at the poor and needy. And there were a few certain Thessalonians that certainly should not be helped at all.

Why should a certain few Thessalonians choose to go back to work? Because of the threat of church discipline, the example of Paul and his companions, and the possibility that the food supply would be cut off. What else might prove to be an incentive?

The fourth incentive is preserving the health of the church. Look at **VV. 11-13**, “**For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. (12) Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. (13) But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.**” The key verse here is **V. 13**. The faithful Christians were discouraged by the conduct of the careless saints who refused to work. “If they don’t have to work, why should we?” This was their argument and Paul nipped it in the bud.

Sin in the life of a believer always affects the rest of the church. As members of His body, we belong to each other and we affect each other. The bad example of a few saints can destroy the devotion, and hinder the service of the rest of the church.

Paul named the sins of this group. Look at **V. 11**, “**For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all.**” Paul is once again alluding to what he mentioned in **V. 6**. The word translated “undisciplined” in **V. 11** is the same word translated “unruly” in **V. 6**. But there is more. Look at the rest of **V. 11**, “**but acting like busybodies.**” Rather than being “busy workers” they had become “busy bodies.” The Greek

word for “busybodies” literally means “to be working around” or in other words “fooling around.” They were not accomplishing anything.

Instead of running around not accomplishing anything, they needed to quietly settle down and work. Look at **V. 12**, “**Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.**” If you have a lot of idle time on your hands, what will you choose to do? Hopefully you would work and become productive. Certainly for these individuals that Paul has in mind in this passage, it was not an option. But these individuals were not only idle, busy going about doing nothing, but they had also become dependent upon the church to care for them. And it was not going to be tolerated.

So once more after encouraging the hard working Christians in Thessalonica to continue working in **V. 13** he goes back to where he began and again shares the same thought “**And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter (and get to work) take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame.**” Let him see himself for who he truly is. Let him see that what he has chosen to do from the standpoint of the church fellowship is totally unacceptable.

But then we read these words of caution in **V. 15** “**And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.**” Any form of discipline that is exercised, whether that is in the church or in our homes, must be motivated by loving concern.

CONCLUSION

Work is not something to be endured or to be put up with. Work is something to be valued. Valued because the Lord values it, and has therefore commanded it, not to be a burden to our life, but rather to be a blessing. Through work we are not only able to meet our basic needs but the needs of others. Through work we have the opportunity to glorify and magnify God by offering up our labor as a sweet smelling sacrifice well pleasing to Him.

Because work is so important, it is a serious thing when a Christian chooses to be idle and become dependent upon another. Because of this Paul has given four different incentives for the idle of Thessalonica to get back to work.

First incentive: If you don't go back to work you face church discipline.

Second incentive: If you don't go back to work you have rejected our very personal costly example of hard labor.

Third incentive: If you don't go back to work, don't expect the church to supply for you when you become hungry.

Fourth incentive: If you don't go back to work the health of the church could very well suffer.

May the Lord grant us the grace to be hard workers. May the Lord bless our lives with fruitful labor that will be a blessing to ourselves, our families, church, community but most of all the Lord.