

2 Thessalonians 3:6-18 — Work As Worship — Part 2

November 10, 2024

Good morning. As a church, we are studying our way through 2 Thessalonians. Today, we will finish the book. The final verses of the third chapter are about work. Since work is a big part of our lives, we are taking two weeks to study the topic.

You are probably wondering where we will go after 2 Thessalonians. Next week, we begin a series on the minor prophets. In the Old Testament, there are 17 books written by the prophets. Five of them are written by the major prophets, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Twelve of them are written by the minor prophets. What is the difference between the minor and major prophets? Did the major prophets play on varsity? Were the minor prophets limited to JV? That is not the case. The difference between the major and minor prophets is not the significance of what they wrote but the length of what they wrote. The dozen books by the minor prophets are shorter than the major prophets. For example, the books of the minor prophets range in length from one chapter, such as Obadiah, to 14 chapters in length, such as Hosea and Zechariah. The major prophets are much longer. Isaiah is considered a major prophet. His book is 66 chapters long. Jeremiah is also a major prophet. His book is 52 chapters long. The minor prophets are usually ignored by the church, but that is all the more reason for us to study them as a church.

We typically study books of the Bible verse by verse. In this series, we will do things a little differently. We will cover one minor prophet a week. It will not matter if the book he wrote was one chapter or 14 chapters. Each book will get a

week. That will give us a 12-week series that will finish in mid-February with a little break in the middle for Christmas. Since this series will function as our Christmas series, Pastor Jordan and I will rotate between campuses, so I get to spend time with the Spencer campus, and he gets to spend time in Spirit Lake. We will also rotate Pastor Brayden and Pastor Stephen into the series. I am looking forward to it. Things kick off next Sunday.

Today, we are in 2 Thessalonians. Let's finish the letter.

Thessalonica — A Hard-Working Church With A Lazy Problem

If you have been with us for a few months, you might be able to remember our first study in 1 Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 1, Paul began that letter with many good things to say about the church in Thessalonica. He was proud of their work of faith. They took risks and lived by faith. He was proud of their labor of love. They sacrificed for people. They loved people. He was thankful for how they imitated him. They learned from Paul and wanted to be like Paul. They also received the word in much afflictions. To be a Christian in Thessalonica meant suffering. It involved loss of income. They were social outcasts. They lost friends. Yet, suffering for Jesus didn't hold them back from following Jesus. Paul called them a model church that was an example for all the other churches in Macedonia and Achaia. That is what is known today as Greece. Overall, the church in Thessalonica was great. It was a model church for others to learn from and follow.

While many good things were happening in the church, as we saw last week, some people were a problem. They refused to go to work, avoided getting

a job, and didn't earn a living. They survived on the generosity of other Christians.

Why did they do this? I don't know. I suspect some of them came from high positions in society. When they became a Christian, they lost their social status. They didn't want to get a job that involved manual labor because they had never done manual labor. They didn't want to get their hands dirty.

I also suspect that some were the panhandlers of the ancient world. They realized they made more money living on handouts from other people than they did at their minimum-wage jobs. They rationalized, "Why get a job? I am making more money doing nothing than doing something."

Overall, the church in Thessalonica was a great and healthy church. Yet there was a problem group in the church who refused to work. As a result, they broke up harmony in the church, soured the church, and were a burden to others who felt obligated to provide for their needs.

Idleness in America

Twenty or thirty years ago, a message on idleness and avoiding work from 2 Thessalonians 3 would not be as relevant to our culture as it is today. Our nation was once known for hard work. At one time, the American work ethic was the world's envy. That isn't the case today. Let me share some statistics I ran across.

- In 2021, after the pandemic, 36% of men ages 18 to 24 were living in their parent's basements. That is more than one in every three young men were not on their own, providing for themselves through work.

- In 2021, 37% of able-bodied Americans—who were neither students nor retired nor caring for children at home—voluntarily dropped out of the workforce and chose a life of idleness and dependency.
- Today, food stamps are at a record high, with 42.1 million receiving them, or 12.6% of the American population.
- There are 11.3 million open jobs in America that businesses can not find employees to fill.

This is not good. Idleness, combined with an insatiable appetite for recreation and distractions, is rising in America. This means that what Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 3 about the dangers of idleness and avoiding work is extremely appropriate in our culture.

While modern American culture is forced to accept a poor work ethic, Christians cannot. As we learned last week, the way we work is an act of practical worship. Jesus is the best. When we work, we give him our best.

Review Of Last Week

1. Last week, we learned from Genesis 2 that work was in the world before sin was in the world. God put Adam in the garden to work it and keep it. Before sin was in the world, Adam was to be a worker. When sin came into the world, it didn't create work, but it made it painful and difficult. The pain of work is from sin. The pleasure of work is from God.
2. Last week, we also learned that despite the Bible's positive view of work, for the first 1,600 years of church history, religious work was viewed as superior to ordinary work. That is not true, but it is what many people believed. Thankfully during the Reformation, there was the recognition that all work is

important work. There was the recognition that ordinary work is just as important as religious work. to God, not just religious work. That includes domestic work, such as milking a cow, changing diapers, cooking dinner, and doing laundry. Domestic work is just as honoring to God as religious work. What honors God is the attitude we have when we work. Domestic work done with a humble and joyful attitude is more honoring to God than public work done with a prideful, self-absorbed attitude. In addition, the quality of our work brings honor to God, no matter what we do. Careless work is dishonoring to God.

3. Last week, we learned from Ephesians 6 that we always do our best, even if our paycheck isn't the best. We do every bit of work as if we are doing it for Jesus himself. As Christians, we ultimately work for Jesus, not our earthly boss. I like to say, we have an audience of one. In addition, God promises to reward us for how we work. Even if our earthly boss doesn't reward us, Jesus promises to reward us.

Last week, after those introductory comments on work, we turned to 2 Thessalonians 3:6- 15, where Paul gives us seven consequences of drifting into idleness instead of pursuing work. Last week, we only had a chance to look at the first.

What are the consequences of avoiding work?

- 1. Those who refuse to work are in danger of being disfellowshipped.**

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. 2 Thessalonians 3:6 (ESV)

As we saw last week, this is a strong rebuke. Paul commanded them to keep away from idle people who avoided work. The Greek word for command is a military term used by officers in the army to command their troops on the battlefield. This was not a suggestion. This was a command. It was a command not given not in Paul's name but in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The hard-working Christians of the church were to make a clear separation between themselves and those who refused to work.

What did this look like? It meant no more free food at the after-church Mexican Fiesta meals. No more free food at Life Group. No more helping at AWANA or youth group. No more having these people over after church to watch football and eat all your nachos and cheese dip. These weren't even allowed to serve on the tech team anymore because they stubbornly refused to get a job and provide for themselves.

Last week, we learned why Paul was so harsh with them. This was the third time he addressed the same topic with them. These people were not listening. In 1 Thessalonians, he mentioned that he told these people to get a job when he was with them in person when he planted the church. He told them they needed to get a job a second time in his first letter to the Thessalonians. At this point, it was the third time he told them to get a job, and they were not listening. This is why Paul has become direct and forceful. We are no different when correcting our children at home when they refuse to listen.

That is where we left off. Let's look at the rest of the consequences of idleness and avoiding work.

2. Those who refuse to work provide a bad example that others will follow.

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. 2 Thessalonians 3:7–8 (ESV)

The key word in these verses is the word imitate. Paul told them that when he was with them, he worked hard to be an example for them to follow, a positive person to imitate. Regarding how to work, Paul said, follow my example. I worked hard. Don't follow the example of the idle people who refuse to work. Paul said, "You ought to imitate us." The Greek word for imitate is *memestos*. From it, we get the English word mimic. Mimic me, not them.

This is one of the problems with idle people. Idleness is contagious. When people don't work, it won't be long until others follow their example and avoid work. Laziness breeds laziness. If you live in a part of the country where your friends game the system to live on government handouts, it won't be long until you learn to game the system and live on government handouts. It is rare to see someone break out of that cycle.

Paul realized that the power of an example works both ways. Just as laziness is contagious, so is diligence. When you are around someone who works hard, you will begin to imitate them. You will learn to work hard because they work hard. Hard work is also catchy.

Some of you know I usually attend a fitness class at the YMCA at noon. I join the rest of the class to jump around the room and sweat off the pounds. A few weeks ago, something happened that almost never happens. I was the only

one in the class. I went through the workouts on the television screen by myself. In all honesty, about halfway through, I wanted to quit. I was bored. I was completely unmotivated to work hard when I was in a room by myself, staring at a TV. That is not me. I am usually fired up to work hard,... when the room is full. I suddenly realized how much the work ethic of the other people in the room affected my work ethic while in the room. When hard-working people weren't around me, I wasn't motivated to be a hard-working person.

The same thing was happening in Thessalonica. The idle people in the church were encouraging more idleness and dependency in the church. Paul fought their bad example by working hard and being a good example for others.

This has application for us. Most of us don't realize how much we influence people around us by our example, either positively or negatively. Our work ethic is caught and imitated by others, especially our children! Sometimes, we don't think we are making a difference in the world around us. Simply working hard with a good attitude and turning to Jesus when we face challenges in life is a great model that others around us will follow, especially our kids.

Look at some of the things Paul says in these verses. I love the way Paul gets a few digs in at the idle people.

...nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it,... 2 Thessalonians 3:8 (ESV)

In Acts 17:7, we see Paul, Silas, and Timothy staying at the house of a wealthy man named Jason. While Jason provided a room for them to stay, they refused to eat his food without paying for it. They worked to provide for their food

and pay for it. This is the opposite of what the idle people were doing. They refused to work and asked the rich to provide them with their food.

...but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. 2 Thessalonians 3:8 (ESV)

Paul reminds them that his work to pay his way was not easy. It was manual labor. In the book of Acts, we learn Paul worked with leather. He made tents with his hands. He worked night and day making and selling tents in the Thessalonian marketplace to provide for himself. The words toil and labor in Greek imply his work involved hard manual labor. In addition to his work, and between his work, he shared the gospel. He was bi-vocational. The kind of manual labor he did to provide for himself was the very thing the lazy people in the church wanted to avoid. He did it because he refused to be a burden to anyone, while lazy people in the church were burdening to everyone.

It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. 2 Thessalonians 3:9 (ESV)

Paul reminds them that he didn't have to do this hard work to earn a living. As an apostle, he had the right to be paid for sharing the gospel, but in the case of the Thessalonians, he was more concerned about the example he set in front of them than the right he had to be financially supported by them. He knew that, as a leader, people would follow his example. He needed to set an example of pursuing hard work, not an example of avoiding work, which people in the church were already doing.

This leads to an important question.

If Paul was a pastor without pay, should all pastors be without pay?

The initial answer to that question is found in verse 8. Paul said he had the right to receive support. He was simply choosing not to use that right. If we look through the New Testament, we find that Paul frequently received support from churches. This allowed him to refrain from work to focus on sharing the gospel instead of work. In two churches, Thessalonica and Corinth, he didn't use his right to be financially supported. Instead, he worked a manual labor job. He did it for the same reason both times: to be an example to people in the church to encourage people to get a job instead of avoiding work.

Look what Paul says about supporting pastors.

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. 1 Timothy 5:17 (ESV)

Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. Galatians 6:6 (ESV)

1 Corinthians offers the most extensive discussion on supporting pastors so they don't always need to work so they can focus on sharing the gospel.

...or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? 1 Corinthians 9:6-7 (ESV)

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Nobody? Who plants a vineyard and doesn't eat any of its fruit? Nobody. Who tends a flock and doesn't get any milk from the animal? Nobody. Those who provide spiritual care for people should be able to be cared for by those people. Paul continues.

For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown

spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? 1 Corinthians 9:9–11 (ESV)

The Old Testament law even says that when you use an ox to thresh the grain, the ox should be able to eat some of the grain he is threshing. That was not written for oxen but for us. Those who work to produce something should be able to enjoy some of the fruit of their labor. That could be oxen treading grain or farmers harvesting grain. The principle is also true spiritually. Those who serve in the church should be able to get their living from those they serve in the church. This is also how it worked in the Old Testament. The priests who served in the temple were paid by the people. If the priests were involved in side jobs to provide for their livelihood, it was because the people had fallen away from the Lord.

Paul summarizes his thoughts in verse 14.

In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. 1 Corinthians 9:14 (ESV)

It is appropriate to pay your pastors. In the case of Corinth and Thessalonica, Paul didn't exercise that right. He wanted people to know that hard manual labor to provide for themselves and their families was a good thing, not a bad thing. He wanted to give them an example to follow. If Paul worked a manual labor job to provide for himself, and he was the founder of the church, what right do I have to avoid manual labor if I am an ordinary person in the church.

3. Those who refuse to work should go hungry.

For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. 2 Thessalonians 3:10 (ESV)

These people knew they were supposed to work and provide for themselves. The problem was motivation. They didn't want to work. They were not sick. They were not elderly. They didn't lack the ability. They lacked the motivation. To motivate them, Paul reminds them of what he commanded them when he was with them. It is a very strong command, but it provides motivation to get a job. If you are unwilling to work, you don't eat. Let them go hungry. It is that simple. That is the Christian view on this subject.

Some of you will say, "If they don't eat, they will die!" The person who is not eating knows that better than you do. Once they realize they will starve to death unless they don't get a job, they will go to work in a hurry. Sometimes, stopping the handouts is the only way to break people's laziness and get them back to work. Some people love handouts and subsidies so much that as long as they can get them, they will never go to work.

Handouts can create a sense of entitlement. People think they deserve handouts instead of work, and they begin to prefer handouts over work. To break the cycle, you remove the handouts to force them back to work.

This brings up the topic of soup kitchens and food banks. Many of them are well-intentioned acts of compassion, yet we need to factor into the equation the truth that as long as we give some people food and money, they will not have the incentive to earn their own food and money. Many coming to soup kitchens are in desperate situations. We should show them compassion. Some coming to soup kitchens need a job more than a meal. They need to be told to go to work instead of asking for handouts instead of work.

The people not working in Thessalonica were especially grievous because they weren't unbelievers. They were Christians. They knew better. They weren't stuck in sin. They were healthy and strong. They just lacked the motivation. In that case, Paul says, let them go hungry.

I suppose some of these people were not just living on handouts to feed themselves but also to feed their families. If that was the case, their lack of motivation to work was especially grievous.

But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. 1 Timothy 5:8 (ESV)

It is bad enough if you are not working to provide for yourself when you can be working. We will let you go hungry so you get the message and break the cycle. But, if you are not providing for your family, you are worse than an unbeliever.

This reminds me of a passage in John 6. Jesus and his disciples went into the wilderness on the other side of the Sea of Galilee to rest. When people heard where Jesus went, a great multitude followed him into the wilderness to hear Jesus teach. At the end of the day, in the middle of nowhere, the only food they had for thousands of people was a little boy's lunch, five barley loaves, and two pickled fish. How would these people survive? Jesus had everyone sit down. He multiplied the food and fed everyone. It is called the feeding of the 5,000, but that was only the men. There were women and children, too. It may have been the feeding of the 20,000, all from a little boy's lunch.

That night, the disciples traveled from one side of the Sea of Galilee to the other in a boat. Jesus also crossed the Sea of Galilee, but he did it the way

Jesus would do it. He walked on water. The next morning, when the crowds realized Jesus was gone, they ran around the lake and found him on the other side. Jesus made them a free and miraculous all-you-can-eat dinner the night before. They asked him to make them a free all-you-can-eat breakfast. They wanted food truck Jesus. Jesus refused to give them free food. They were mad at him because Jesus refused to feed them. Why didn't Jesus make them a free breakfast? They didn't need it. The night before, they were in the wilderness, and people were starving. Now they were back in the city. They didn't need free food. They needed to get a job to pay for their food. That is the same message of Paul to the lazy Thessalonians.

4. Those who refuse to work destroy harmony in the church.

For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. 2 Thessalonians 3:11 (ESV)

Paul said that some were living in idleness. The Greek word for idleness means undisciplined. Instead of self-discipline, they had a lack of discipline. The result is that instead of being busy at work, they are busybodies because they had no work. In Greek, Paul was making a play on words. The Greek word for word is *erga*. He says that instead of *ergizomai*, and focusing their energy in one place, at work, they were *periergizomai*. They were putting their energy around the perimeter and giving it to every place else instead of work.

Everybody has energy. Every day will focus our energy somewhere. We can be productive and focus it at work. If people are not engaged in work, they still have energy. They just end up focusing it around the perimeter. They become busybodies and focus on everybody else's business instead of their work. Those

who don't work tend to stick their noses in everybody else's business instead of focusing on their own business.

Let me cautiously give you an example that may hit a little too close to home for some of us. It is social media. It is easy to spend a lot of time on social media. It is easy to fritter away hours each day as concern ourselves with other people's business on social media instead of focusing on our own business. I am not saying social media is wrong. It becomes wrong when we become digital busybodies who spend each day posting about and addicted to other people's lives instead of focusing on our jobs, our own families, our children, and our own lives. We all know people who spend so much time on other people's lives on social media that they neglect their work, their job, their family, their cleaning, and even their spiritual health.

Back in Thessalonica, they didn't have social media. They were not digital busybodies but regular busybodies. They were more concerned with other people's lives than with taking care of their own life and family. As a result of sticking their nose in everyone else's business instead, they were breaking down the harmony and unity of the church. If you have nothing to do, you will find time to gossip and talk about everybody else. When you have plenty to do, you have no time to gossip. You are focused on your work and your family instead of other people.

I don't know how this happened, but I can imagine it. On Sundays at church in Thessalonica, people saw these idle folks coming down the hall, and they avoided them. They ducked into classrooms to get away from them. You

knew these people would ask \$50 to buy lunch that day. You know these people would gossip to you, and later, they would repeat whatever you said and gossip about you. These busybodies were breaking down the harmony and unity of the church.

Look what Paul tells them to do.

Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. 2 Thessalonians 3:12 (ESV)

Paul pulls out the word command again. This is not optional. It is a command from the Lord Jesus Christ: Get a job, do your work, mind your own business, earn your living, and focus on caring for your family and your life instead of everyone else's.

5. Those who refuse to work make others grow weary of doing good.

As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. 2 Thessalonians 3:13 (ESV)

Paul says, as for you brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. The constant requests for handouts from people who could work but didn't want work made everyone in the church weary of doing good. People were becoming so fed up with the deadbeats in the church that they didn't want to help anyone in the church. These deadbeats were making everyone's heart grow cold to helping those in need.

It is like the political texts we received before the election. If you are like me, you were getting them all day. After a while, I started to ignore all my text messages because I was burned out by all the bogus one. Since I was ignoring all the pointless texts, I started to miss the important texts.

That is what happened in Thessalonica. All the bogus needs from lazy people were developing weary hearts so genuine needs were missed.

This is why Paul reminds the church, "I know you are getting tired of these loafers, but don't let their loafing make you weary of doing good." Send a clear message to the loafers who could work but won't work. You won't feed them. If they don't get a job, they will starve. But when it comes to those in genuine need, don't develop a hard heart. Continue to help.

Look what Proverbs tells us about the importance of going out of our way to help those in genuine need and not growing weary of doing good.

Whoever gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse. Proverbs 28:27 (ESV)

When we give to those in legitimate need, God promises to provide for our needs.

Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed. Proverbs 19:17 (ESV)

When we are generous to the poor, God promises to pay us back. The math may not work in our budget, but it always works in God's budget. He promises to repay us for helping those in genuine need.

Jesus says the same thing in the gospels.

He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." Luke 14:12–14 (ESV)

God promises to repay us whenever we give to the poor. It may not be in this life, but for sure it will be in the next life. Don't let the deadbeat busybodies in the church let you grow weary of doing good.

6. Those who persist in not working should experience shame.

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. 2 Thessalonians 3:14 (ESV)

Paul says, if anyone does not obey his instructions in this letter, take special note of this person. Mark him out. He is stubborn and rebellious. Keep your eye on this person to avoid associating with him. Watch him to be sure you avoid him. Make sure everyone withdraws from him. Put the pressure of isolation and public rebuke on him until he gets the message and gets a job.

Paul began in v.6 with the pressure of disfellowship from the church for those who refused to work. But Paul realizes that even after this harsh section of this letter, some will not listen. Some will be stubborn and continue to refuse to work. How do we handle those who still refuse to listen? Keep the pressure on them. Isolate them. Let them experience shame.

In Greek, the word for shame is very distasteful. It means to turn in on oneself. It means to see oneself and our sin for what it truly is. Shame is feeling what you are. It is comprehending what has been done. The idle folks who refused to listen even to Paul's letter needed to feel shame for refusing to work, especially after the great apostle Paul provided an example of him working in manual labor to provide for his own needs.

This applies today. We all know busybodies who avoid work. It could be for religious reasons or just old-fashioned lazy reasons. Paul tells us to make the

message clear that everyone who can work should be involved in work. We should keep that message clear, even when people refuse to listen.

7. Don't give up on Christians who refuse to repent.

Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. 2 Thessalonians 3:15 (ESV)

I love what Paul says in his final words. In spite of all the stubbornness of these people who refuse to work, don't treat them as enemies when they refuse to listen and learn. Treat them as a brother.

If I was in this situation, after warning them multiple times, shaming them, disciplining them, refusing to feed food to them, and they still wouldn't get the message, I would be done with them. Paul says we don't do that. We still treat them as a brother, not an enemy.

Do you know why?

Conclusion

The reason we keep on loving them and refuse to give up on them is because that is how God treats us. How many times have we been lazy? How often have we been told the truth from God's Word, yet we refused to listen? How many times has God shamed us to correct us, but we never changed? How often has God brought physical hardship into our lives to correct us? He let us go hungry, but we would not listen.

No matter how stubborn and unteachable we have been, God never gives up on us. He still loves us. Because God never gives up on us when we are stubborn and unteachable, we never give up on a brother or sister in Christ when they are stubborn and unteachable.

This week, I don't know where you are at with Jesus. You may have walked away from Jesus. Has disciplined you, but you refused to learn and repent. You must know that no matter how far you have God and how stubborn you have been, Jesus still loves you. He has not given up on you. If you will turn and come home to him, his arms are still open wide. It is not just the arms of Jesus that are open wide, but the arms of his church are open wide, too. Just as Jesus never gives up on us, we will never give up on you.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess is ordained in the Evangelical Free Church of America. He enjoys reading, writing, and time with his family. Feel free to contact him at www.Christ2RCulture.com (www.c2rc.com)

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