

“Will Work for Food” (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15)

A woman went with her husband to the doctor’s office. When the checkup was over, the doctor asked the man to wait outside so he could talk to the wife. He had a very somber look on his face and asked her to sit down. “Your husband is suffering from a very severe stress disorder. If you don’t do what I ask, he is not going to make it. Here’s what I want you to do. Get up early each morning and fix him a healthy breakfast. Make him a nutritious lunch and prepare a really special dinner every night. Be pleasant at all times. Don’t burden him with chores or discuss your problems with him. You will need to do almost all the work around the house. And, you can’t nag him about anything. If you can do this for a year, your husband will completely regain his health.”

As they were driving home, the husband turned to his wife and asked, “What did the doctor say?” To which she replied, “He said you only have one year to live!”

In this fictional story, the wife wasn’t interested in following the doctor’s orders by doing the work that it would take to make things better. She wasn’t willing to pay the price to nurse her husband back to health. She preferred to ignore the doctor’s orders. Unfortunately, a similar scenario can also be true of believers in the local church. Some Christians are not willing to adhere to biblical commands that relate to work. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, Paul orders Christians to earn their keep by working to provide for themselves and their families. In these ten verses, he shares three important principles.

1. Keep away from idle Christians (3:6). Paul writes, “**Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.**”¹ Paul issues a “**command**”² to the church (cf. 3:4, 10, 12). This is not a suggestion that is open to clarification or debate; it is a “command.” A general would use this word when he gave orders to his troops.³ The command is given “**in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.**”⁴ Paul exhorts these believers to keep working by appealing to the authority of the “Lord Jesus Christ.” He uses the Savior’s full title here to communicate the absolute seriousness of the problem at hand. When my parents used to call out, “Keith Richard Krell,” I knew they were dead serious. Paul is doing the same thing here. He commands the church to “**keep away from every brother who leads⁵ an unruly life and not according to the tradition⁶ which you received from us.**” He is saying, “For the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ keep away from believers who disregard what we say.”⁷ The word translated “**keep away**”⁸ means to abstain or avoid. It was used of furling the sails on a boat. When the wind would come up, they would unfurl the sails, or open them up. When the wind died down, they would furl them, or pull them back in. Likewise, we’re to pull back intimate fellowship from believers who lead “unruly lives.” The word translated “**unruly**”⁹ is another military word used to describe soldiers who were not maintaining rank. Those who are unruly have gone AWOL from their God-given responsibility to work.

It seems a bit strong to sever ties with slackers, doesn’t it? Paul will develop this further in 3:14-15, but for now, remember that these believers had ignored Paul’s face-to-face instruction, had blown off the exhortation in the first letter (1 Thess 4:11-12), and were continuing in their errant behavior. These people were disobedient. They were not simply uninformed or confused. People weren’t working. Why? The text doesn’t tell us. All kinds of reasons have been suggested: a certainty that the rapture was near, a dislike for manual labor, a view that the spiritual life was more important than the physical life. We can’t know for sure why they weren’t working, but we can know the appropriate response to such believers. The Bible is clear that work is worthy because it has been stamped with God’s creativity and sanctified by His eternal purposes.

[After issuing a command; Paul now appeals to his own example in 3:7-13.]

2. Imitate the examples of hard workers (3:7-13). Paul writes, **“For you yourselves know¹⁰ how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, 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 would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.”** Paul, Silas, and Timothy modeled what it means to work to the point of pain (“**labor and hardship**”). And, they did this night and day when they were with the Thessalonian believers. They worked hard, not because they weren’t entitled to some support, but because they wanted to give these Christians a model that they could imitate. Because they were planting a church, they did not want to be a burden to the believers (cf. 1 Thess 2:7-9). The sluggards, on the other hand, were trying to leach off the church when they should have been working.

Verse 9 is a parenthetical comment. Paul could have received financial support but he chose not to.¹¹ According to the Bergen (N.J.) Record, the zoo in Copenhagen, Denmark, recently put a human couple on display. Henrik Lehmann and Malene Botoft live in a see-through cage, in the primate display, next to the baboons and the monkeys. Their 320-square-foot habitat has a living room with furniture, a computer, a television, and stereo. The kitchen and bedroom are part of the display. Only the bathroom is excluded from public view. Unlike their neighbors, who aren’t allowed out, the two humans occasionally leave their fishbowl existence to shop and water the flowers on their porch back at home. “We don’t notice visitors anymore,” said Lehmann. “If I want to pick my nose or my toes now, I do it.” We would do well to remember that people are watching the way we live.¹²

I’m thankful for the strong work ethic that my parents passed on to me. Both my mom and dad worked with everything they had. I’m also grateful for the hard workers in this congregation who model what it means to labor to the point of pain. When you think of a hard worker, who do you think of? Are there some examples that you emulate?

It is important to recognize that work is not necessarily paid employment. When I was growing up my parents would often say, “Keith, you need to work because you’re a member of this family.” I believe that this is something that we need to instruct our children in today. Most children and teenagers have it good. It’s okay to ask something of them. Blythe Stanton (our elder chairman) has said, “If a boy’s mother doesn’t teach him a good work ethic he won’t have one as a man.” This principle should motivate us as parents to realize that we must encourage our children to work. We must instill within them a godly work ethic.

In 3:10, Paul refers back to a maxim that he repeated all the time: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” We might say, “No loaf to the loafer and no soup for the slacker.” Paul is not speaking of those who cannot find work, nor of those who, through injury or illness, are not able to work, but of those who deliberately choose not to work. We should never use this verse to hammer the poor or the unemployed because we often don’t know the whole story.¹³ Some of you have been looking for employment for many months and you can’t find a job. We hurt for you and we support you. This verse is referring to a small minority of idle believers who refused to work. Yet, the principle still applies. If we want food we must be willing to work.¹⁴ A hungry stomach will do wonders for a lazy Christian.

God is Himself a worker. After all, He is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. As such, He designed a working vocation as a necessary part of life, even before the fall, and He expects each of us to be involved in some form of vocation that we might support ourselves, find a sense of significance and destiny in our labor, and be a productive member of society. Thus, denying support to those who are

unwilling to work is not cruel, but becomes a basic form of discipline to force idlers into reality and into the responsibility of becoming productive people. This kind of discipline is tough-love and provides a protection to both the individual and to society.¹⁵ To keep providing them with the necessities of life would only encourage their irresponsibility.¹⁶

In 3:11, Paul writes, **“For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies.”**¹⁷ Verse 11 describes what the unruly had begun to do: instead of being busy, they are **“busybodies.”**¹⁸ The Greek word literally means “to be working around.” It’s not that these people were inactive, but that they were active in an unproductive, irresponsible, and disruptive manner.¹⁹ A busybody is one who has so much time on his hands that he stays busy by meddling in the lives of others.²⁰ Someone has compared busybodies to mules: When they are pulling, they cannot kick; when they are kicking, they cannot pull. A person who is working hard is generally not lashing out at those around him. The individual who is inflicting pain on others is usually not pulling his/her load. Paul is saying, “Stop being an unnecessary burden on the rest of the community.”

In 3:12, Paul has some strong words for those who are in the habit of being idle: **“Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.”** Notice again the use of the word **“command”** and the full title **“Lord Jesus Christ.”** He’s calling the slacker to mind his own business and to stop flitting around in the lives of others. Ephesians 4:28 provides some helpful insight: “He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.” When we work we don’t have to lean on others but can instead help those who are hurting.

In 3:13, Paul recognizes that it’s easy to get discouraged when we see people doing things that are wrong. So he says, **“But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary²¹ of doing good.”** This verse is to be applied in three ways: First, this is Paul’s way of encouraging those who are hard workers to not get bummed out when they see those who are not working. In Galatians 6:9, Paul says, “Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.” We must trust God with the results. Second, we should not let busybodies bother us to such a degree that we withhold financial help from those who legitimately need it. Lastly, it also means that we must carry out disciplinary action against disobedient slackers if it proves necessary.

[After issuing a command and appealing to his example, Paul returns to another series of commands.]

3. Discipline disobedient slackers (3:14-15). Verse 14 deals with the matter of church discipline, a subject that we strive to take seriously as a church.²² Paul writes, **“If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.”** These idlers had refused to obey orders and were clearly exhibiting a rebellious spirit. As a result, specific and tough measures were needed. Paul urges the church to **“take special note”** of those who are disobeying. This word is plural and in the middle voice, which suggests, “note for oneself,” with the implication that all the members of the congregation were to take responsibility for following these instructions. Church discipline will have little effect if not followed by the whole body. This means that the whole church is to take this seriously by keeping an eye on the person who persists in going down a wrong path. They are to watch him so they can avoid him.

Paul says, **“Do not associate with him.”** This verb **“do not associate”** means that the church is not to “get mixed up with” or have close associations with a slacker. In essence, idle believers were to be ostracized from intimate fellowship with the believers of the assembly as a means of shaming them into repentance and change. This should not be confused with formal excommunication as in Matthew 18. Rather, it appears to be more a matter of group disapproval and social ostracism.

You and I must be careful to not endorse or enable self-destructive behavior. Sometimes we need to pull back in order for people to fall down so they will look up. The goal of church discipline must always be restoration. The hope was that the idle individuals would be isolated to the point that they would feel ashamed of their actions. This should then lead them to become so hungry that they would be forced to go back to work. When idlers are ostracized from intimate fellowship with believers, they should feel some shame so that they will respond to the cries of their conscience.²³ But we must remember the goal of church discipline is never punishment, but tough actions of love, done with a view to *reformation* and *restoration* to fellowship with Christ and the body of Christ.

Verse 15 provides us with a much-needed reminder to not be too harsh with those who are messing up. Paul writes, **“Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”** Why does Paul have to say this? Because our default setting is to get angry with those who sin differently than we do. The offenders are not enemies but fellow believers in the Lord. They are brothers to be admonished, not enemies to be abused. At the same time, we are not to excuse behavior; but we’re to **“admonish”** or “warn,” (ESV, NIV, NRSV) in a “tough-love” kind of way. The word “admonish” (*noutheteo*) represents a Greek word from which the idea of “nouthetic counseling” is derived. It literally means “to set one’s mind.” In this context, it means to admonish with God’s Word, towards the goal of obedience.²⁴ To admonish someone is literally to put sense or biblical wisdom into the mind so that it changes behavior. To sum up, the idle believer was not to be treated as an enemy cut off from all contacts, but was allowed to continue in a brotherly status. So lines of communication were kept open for continued warnings about his behavior.

Why am I teaching about this? For the simple reason that our culture has become confused about work. On one hand, we have “workaholics” and on the other extreme are “workabhorics.” We need balance. This passage reminds us that we can all be prone to sloth. Many of us have jokingly adopted the philosophies of bumper stickers. Have you seen the bumper sticker that says, “Work fascinates me, I can sit and watch it for hours?” Here’s one that some of you may agree with: “The worst day of fishing is better than the best day of working.” Another one I’ve seen goes like this: “Hard work may not kill me but why take a chance?” While these are all funny, there is an element of truth in that it hits a bit too close to home.

So how do you get rid of sloth? There are at least six ways to turn over a new leaf.²⁵

1. Seek God’s forgiveness. Face the fact that you’ve been slothful and ask the Lord to forgive you.
2. Open your eyes to opportunities. Pray for the privilege to serve. The best-kept secret in America today is that people would rather work hard for something they believe in than enjoy a life of pampered idleness.²⁶ But I’m a senior citizen, you say? Now that I’m 70 or 80 I can’t do what I once did when I was 30 or 40. That’s okay. But you can still do something useful and meaningful. You can volunteer at CareNet, visit people in nursing homes, offer hospitality, host a Bible study in your home, develop a mentoring relationship, or maintain a close relationship with your grandchildren.²⁷
3. Set a goal. I will accomplish... The fruit of our labor is what God has designed to provide for our most basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter. But the benefit of work goes beyond this. There is a form of stress, called *eustress*, that we all need for rich and fulfilling lives. Work is one of the great outlets provided by God for this experience.²⁸
4. Buddy up with a friend. Ask for accountability in your work ethic.
5. Ask for God’s help. Pray that God will increase your work ethic as a means of worshipping Him.
6. Thank God. Express deep gratitude for the privilege to work.

Russ McMillan closing illustration: Russ received a citizen’s award from the City of Tacoma for his work with the community, in conjunction with his job on a clean-up project in the Middle Waterway of Commencement Bay in Tacoma.

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Notes

¹ In 2 Thess 3:4, Paul stated that he was confident the church would faithfully do the things the apostles commanded.

² Gk. *paragellomen* (“command”) is the first word in this sentence for emphasis. Cf. 1 Thess 4:11; 2 Thess 3:4, 10, 12.

³ The verb “command” (*paragello*) appears in those texts where a person in authority gives orders (as the Lord Jesus does in Matt 10:5; Luke 8:29; 9:21; Acts 1:4; 10:42).

⁴ Cf. Acts 3:6; 16:18; 1 Cor 1:10; 5:3-4; Phil 2:10.

⁵ Gk. *peripatountos*: “walking in an undisciplined way” (“walking” is a common NT idiom for one’s way of life or conduct).

⁶ The word “tradition” (*paradosin*) refers to teaching that has been passed on from Jesus and His apostles.

⁷ The book of Proverbs has a lot to say about those who are intentionally idle by referring to them as sluggards (e.g., 6:9; 10:26; 19:24; 21:25; 26:14).

⁸ Gk. *stellesthai* is only used in the NT in 2 Cor 8:20.

⁹ Gk. *ataktos*, see also 2 Thes 3:11.

¹⁰ In his letters to the church at Thessalonica, Paul reminds his readers of what they already knew (see 1 Thess 1:5; 2:1, 2, 5, 9, 10, 11; 3:3, 4; 4:2; 5:2; 2 Thess 2:5, 6). See Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: PNTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 346.

¹¹ Green writes, “Paul did teach elsewhere that to receive financial support for Christian service was an acceptable practice, although he did not make use of this privilege (3:9; 1 Cor 9:7-14; Gal 6:6; 1 Tim 5:17-18; cf. Matt 10:10). On the other hand, he raised his voice against those who engaged in ministry simply for financial gain (Acts 20:33; 1 Tim 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7).” Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 347.

¹² Preaching Today Citation: *Parade* (12/29/96). *Leadership*, Vol. 17, no. 3. See also the *New York Times* 8/29/96.

¹³ Eaton writes, “Paul has a lot of sympathy for people who are in need (Rom 15:26-29; 2 Cor 8-9; Gal 2:10) but he deals severely with Christians who love excitement but have no love for work.” Michael Eaton, *Preaching Through The Bible: 1, 2 Thessalonians* (England: Sovereign World, 1997), 118.

¹⁴ It’s interesting that after Jesus fed the 5,000 in John 6, the next day they showed up again for breakfast, only this time He didn’t feed them. He fed them the day before in order to teach them and reveal Himself to them, but He wasn’t interested in subsidizing slackers or providing people with an eternal welfare state.

¹⁵ See also Hampton Keathley III, *2 Thessalonians: An Exegetical and Devotional Commentary* (www.bible.org), 61.

¹⁶ Getz writes, “On a more personal and pragmatic side, there is another reason Paul might have been disturbed. He and his fellow missionaries had voluntarily given up the right to financial support and had diligently and sacrificially earned their own living to be a model to these people. When some of these Christians did not respond, either to their example or their exhortations, Paul had to feel a certain amount of disappointment. He was human and had to feel ‘used.’ Even so, Paul’s overriding concern was that these people were willfully walking out of the will of God after having been reminded again and again.” See Gene A. Getz, *A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Chicago: Moody, 1990), 2000.

¹⁷ Paul uses a play on words, “busybodies instead of busy.”

¹⁸ There is a neat play on the Greek words in 2 Thess 3:11, since the word “busybody” (*periergazomai*) is built on the root of the word “work” (*ergazomai*).

¹⁹ See Michael W. Holmes, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 273.

²⁰ Proverbs 26:17 paints a vivid picture of what can happen when we meddle in matters that shouldn’t matter to us: “Like one who takes a dog by the ears is he who passes by and meddles with strife not belonging to him.”

Busybodies often turn into gossips according to 1 Timothy 5:13: “At the same time they also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention.” It’s easy to get into the habit of being idle. When that happens, being a busybody and passing along gossip can easily become a vocation in itself.

²¹ The only other NT occurrences of the phrase “do not grow weary” are found in Luke 18:1; 2 Cor 4:1, 16; and Gal 6:9.

²² The Bible gives us several other passages that have to do with disciplining a straying disciple (Matt 18:15-18; Gal 6:1-3; Titus 3:10; 1 Cor 5:1-3).

²³ There is a difference between acquaintanceship, friendship, and fellowship; for fellowship means “to have in common.” For obedient saints to treat disobedient Christians with the same friendship they show to other dedicated saints is to give approval to their sins.

²⁴ See Richard Mayhue, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1999), 200.

²⁵ These six applicational strategies come from Ed Young, *Fatal Distractions* (Nashville: Nelson, 2000), 96-97.

²⁶ Preaching Today Citation: John W. Gardner, *Leadership*, Vol. 6, no. 4.

²⁷ Dobson writes, “The world seems to worship youth and is terrified of aging. But there was a time when getting older was associated with wisdom and experience. In fact, some of the greatest accomplishments in history came very late in life. Immanuel Kant wrote one of his best philosophical works at the age of 74. Verdi penned his classic ‘Ave Maria’ at 85.... Michelangelo was 87 when he completed The Pietá, his greatest work of art.... And Ronald Reagan was the most powerful man in the world at 75.... This notion that life should be winding down at 50 or 60 years of age is crazy.” Preaching Today Citation: James Dobson, *Coming Home* (Tyndale, 1998); submitted by Brad Estep, Kenneth City, Florida.

²⁸ See Randy Frazee, *Making Room for Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 167.