

Is Not Working a Sin?

2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-15

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This morning I would like for us to consider a question that came in from one of our members back in November of last year, and the question as it is written is this: If you are not working but are able to work, is that sinful? I hope you will agree with me that this is a relevant question, and we are certainly thankful for the good-hearted person who asked it. If you are not working but are able to work, is that sinful? Is it a sin not to work?

It is interesting to me that the apostle Paul seems to have addressed an almost identical question in the New Testament book of 2 Thessalonians, and so I would invite you to turn with me this morning to 2 Thessalonians 3 (p. 1853). We know that the Bible is a relevant book, and that certainly continues to be the case this morning. And I say that, because as we read the books of 1-2 Thessalonians, we find that the Christians in the ancient Macedonian city of Thessalonica were facing some of the same challenges we face today.

Paul first went to Thessalonica on his Second Missionary Journey, from 49-51 AD. You might remember how Paul (at the end of Acts 15) wanted to go revisit the churches they had established on the First Missionary Journey. Paul and Barnabas, though, had that ***“sharp disagreement,”*** so they split up. Paul chose Silas and left. When he got to Derbe and Lystra in the Roman province of Asia Minor, they picked up Timothy. As they traveled around, they saw that vision of the man from Macedonia saying ***“Come over to Macedonia and help us.”*** So, they headed directly for northern Greece, where they focused on Philippi, one of the major cities, a Roman colony. In Philippi, they baptized Lydia. They were beaten and thrown in jail, where they then baptized the Philippian jailer. And from Philippi they went to Thessalonica. We read about this visit in Acts 17, where we find that they spent only 3 weeks before basically being run out of town. Paul, then, kept moving, heading down to Berea, then Athens, and then Corinth, before heading back home.

Well, as Paul was in Corinth, he was obviously a little bit worried about the new congregation he had just established up the coast in Thessalonica. Again, he had been run out of town after only three weeks. So here he is in Corinth for about 18 months, he writes two fairly brief letters with more instruction that he could not fit in in the three weeks he was there – the books of 1-2 Thessalonians. And I would point out here at the beginning that this idea that we need to work, including our passage this morning, has now been emphasized at least three times. If you want to keep a finger in 2 Thessalonians 3, I would invite you to turn back briefly to 1 Thessalonians 4, and notice, please, 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12. In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul encourages these

new Christians to ***“excel still more,”*** and then in verse 11 he says, ***“...and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.”*** So if you caught that, Paul is saying here: You need to work hard, just as we commanded you when we were there. So we have the original command in person, we have the reminder in 1 Thessalonians 4:10, and this morning we come to 2 Thessalonians 3, which is now the third time Paul has to tell these people to work! That tells us something! When a group of people need to be told three times to get themselves in gear, there is a problem. And Paul addresses this problem with instruction from God.

So this brings us to 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, as Paul lays down God’s law in no uncertain terms. Notice with me, please, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15,

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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 would 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, so that you would follow our example. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

This morning, then, we are thinking about the question: If you are not working but are able to work, is that sinful? I want us to look at Paul’s words here to try to come to a Biblical answer to this question. And as we look at this passage, I want us to back up a little bit and notice four observations that I believe will help us to come to pretty solid conclusion on this.

I. **And the first observation I want us to notice here is that PAUL PRAISES WORK.**

And we see this throughout the passage. Work is good! I have put a picture up here of our family working together. When I think of work, I think of firewood, and this goes back to my own childhood – scavenging firewood from all over Crystal Lake, splitting, chopping, stacking, hauling, burning, and then shoveling the ashes as the process starts all over again. Work is one of those basic qualities that fathers (especially) need to instill in their children. Last week I pointed out that all kids need to be getting an allowance. This week I need to point out: Kids also need to be working! Kids need to be familiar with splitting and stacking firewood! We go through about two of these piles as we heat our home each year, and there is some work involved. It is hard, but there is a value to work.

And here in this passage, we notice, first of all, that Paul praises work as being good. In fact, Paul personally set a good example of hard work. During those three weeks in Thessalonica, Paul did not accept or demand any payment for his work as a preacher (as he had done and would continue to do in other cities). But, because there was a special situation in this particular place, Paul decided to support himself for those three

weeks. I would should point out that Paul did receive some outside support during this time, from the church in Philippi (we can read about that over in Philippians 4:15-16). However, he supplemented his income by working as a tentmaker. And by doing that, Paul set an example, because generally speaking, work is good.

And what Paul says about work here is supported by the entirety of God's word. Some people might have the idea that work is part of the curse going back to the Garden of Eden. What we need to realize, though, is that Adam was given a job to do before the first sin. The curse made work more difficult, but work itself is good and has been blessed by God. We think of God's command (under the Law of Moses) to rest on the Sabbath Day. Some people may focus on the **"rest"** part of that command. But do we understand what God actually commanded there? God said (in Exodus 20:8-10), **"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work..."** Again, many tend to focus on the seventh day. But did you notice what God said his people need to be doing the other six days? **"Six days you shall labor."** Under the Law of Moses, work was commanded by God. Work is one of the Ten Commandments! Just as the Sabbath was commanded, six days of labor was commanded as well, not as a curse, but simply because work is good. Work is a part of God's plan. And remember: God set the example. Yes, God rested on the seventh day, but he rested because he had been working those six days beforehand.

And I know we are not under the Law of Moses, but we see some wisdom there – there is wisdom in working for six days and then taking a day off. When I first started preaching, I remember my dad encouraging me to take a day off every week. He would call, "Are you taking a day off?" He reminded me that, "...the human body was designed to get more done in six days than it could get done in seven." Does that make sense? The human body was designed to get more done in six days than it could get done in seven. In other words, when we take a day off every week, we actually get more done than if we were to work for seven days straight. This is how the human body was designed. The Christians in Thessalonica, though, appear to have taken this to an extreme. So with this in mind, I might add to dad's advice: The human body was also designed to get more done in six days than it can get done in 5, 4, 3, 2, or 1! There is a value to working hard. There is a value to keeping busy.

Some of the kids here this morning might be wondering about this: What if I don't have a job? What if I'm 10 years old and don't have a job? I would say: At this point in your life, going to school IS your job! We go to school, so that we can do our work more effectively some day. Even grownups go to school sometimes so that they can be better at their work, so that they can get paid more for the work that they do. To the kids, then, I would say: Your job is to study, to read, to get good grades. Your job is to pay attention. Your job is to learn.

Some might ask: But what if I am independently wealthy? What if I'm at a point in my life where I don't really need to work? Then I would say: Make it your life's work to share those blessings. Isn't that what Paul taught in our scripture reading this morning? Those who are rich in this world are to **"do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share"** (1 Timothy 6:18). Some might ask: But what if I can't find a job? Keep looking! Make it your job to find a job. In the mail here at church this morning we received a flyer for a Dane County job fair (posted on the bulletin board). Some might ask: But what if I don't enjoy working? Too bad! We can blame Adam for that one.

Getting back to our text, though, we find that some in the church in Thessalonica were apparently slacking off and were taking advantage of the kindness of their Christian family. They were mooching. They didn't have the understanding that work was good. They thought they could sit back and let the church help. And so in verse 10 Paul had to give the reminder, **"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.” That is a rather harsh statement! But as we notice here how Paul praises work, we need to be clear: He is speaking of those who are not **“willing”** to work. He’s not talking about those who are not ABLE to work. We see the kind of trouble this could cause in the church, as some who are ABLE but not WILLING are slacking off and expecting the church to give them food. Work, then, is the responsible thing to do. By working when we are able, we keep ourselves from being a burden on those who do work. Beyond this, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:28, we labor, **“performing work with our own hands so that we will have something to share with those who have a need.”** Some might ask: But what if all of my needs are met? What if my mom and dad supply all of my needs? What if they feed me, and pay my insurance, and give me gas money, and so on? I would suggest (as Paul does): Work, then, to help others!

When those who are able but unwilling to work expect others to subsidize their lifestyle, they sin. And even further (as we see in this passage), those of us who provide food also sin. We sin by encouraging laziness. And if we encourage laziness, if we continually feed those who stubbornly refuse to work when they are able, we will attract more and more who figure it out: These people will feed me when I’m lazy! Paul, though, says that we are to cut it off. I do find it interesting: Paul doesn’t tell us to let them starve. And the reason is: When we cut off the free food, those who are able but not willing to work, when they get hungry enough, will eventually be able to get over their unwillingness! Starvation is not the solution; work is the solution. And this is why Paul doesn’t tell us to feed them anyway and try to convince them to get a job. Instead, as I see it, Paul is saying: Let hunger do the convincing. Hunger can do some amazing things. Hunger is a motivator. But the main point here at the beginning is that work is good. We work so as not to be a burden on others. We work because work is a part of God’s plan. We work to help others. And we work because it beats the alternative – it is much better than going hungry!

II. As we look back at this passage, I would make a second observation, and that is: For those of us who are able, WHEN WE DO NOT WORK, IT OPENS US UP TO ALL KINDS OF TROUBLE.

In verse 11, notice, please, the consequences of not working when we are able, **“For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies.”** The word **“busybody”** comes from a word meaning “to work around,” and the idea is of somebody who is out there bouncing around, putting their nose in everybody’s business but their own. So, as Paul sees it, those who are able but unwilling to work are a double threat – not only lazy themselves, but interfering with the work of others as well! These were people with too much time on their hands. The human mind is quite active, and when we don’t focus that activity in a productive way, we tend to get ourselves in trouble – evil thoughts, gossip, whining, complaining – always nose-deep in somebody else’s business. Not only do THEY not work, but they don’t mind interrupting OUR work! Have we ever known somebody like that? They may not work, but they are still busy – they are busy wreaking havoc. We think of what the wise man Solomon said in Proverbs 26:17, **“Like one who takes a dog by the ears is he who passes by and meddles with strife not belonging to him.”** Solomon would say: Mind your own business and get a job! This is what Paul is warning about here. When we are able to work but refuse to do so, we end up with too much time on our hands, and we tend get ourselves in trouble.

I know we haven’t touched on retirement yet. Retirement is not really a Biblical concept. Not that it’s wrong at all, but don’t we see a danger here? Even when not working a full-time job, it seems that Paul would still encourage all of us to be productive in some way if at all possible, if we are able. I am thankful we have so many seniors here at this congregation who set such a good example in this regard – retired “in theory,” but using their time to do some amazing things for the Lord. When I got here this morning, the mailbox outside was stuffed to the point where it wouldn’t even close. It was stuffed with Bible correspondence courses. I

think of Patsy who does so much work with this program, and I sincerely hope she gets to feeling better soon! I think of Chuck who retired as a pipefitter from John Deere over in Horicon. Instead of wasting his retirement, he went back to school (to the Florida School of Preaching) to be a preacher and moved back up here to Beaver Dam and gave God some of his most productive years, instead of sitting around doing nothing. And there are so many other examples of this here.

Paul, then, has a command (in verse 12): For those with too much time on their hands who butt in on others' business, get a job! They are to ***“work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.”*** Get to work, he says. Turn off the TV, shut down the X-Box, put down the chips, log off of Facebook, and get a job! Even if it's a low-wage job, even if it's a part-time job, do something to keep yourself out of trouble.

So we've seen this morning, first of all, that work is good. And secondly, we've seen a special warning in this passage for those who refuse to work. When we are able but not willing to work, we tend to get in trouble.

III. **There is a third concept in this passage we need to consider, and that is: LAZINESS IS CONTAGIOUS, SO DO NOT BE HANGING OUT WITH OTHER SLACKERS.**

We are to avoid having close relationships with lazy people; otherwise, it tends to rub off on us. And this is really where this passage begins, up in verse 6, ***“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.”*** When Paul says that we are to ***“keep away”*** from these people, he uses a word that was used on sailboats in the ancient world. You would hoist a sail to catch the wind, but if the sail was no longer needed for whatever reason, you would gather it up or pull it in. In a similar way, we are to pull ourselves back from those in the congregation who lead an ***“unruly life.”*** An ***“unruly life”*** is a life that is literally out of step with the rest of the congregation. We have the picture of an army marching, but there is this one guy who just doesn't get it – he just doesn't seem to want to go along with the program. He is marching to the beat of a different drummer, so to speak. Paul says, that is not okay. You need to establish some boundaries. Counselors and therapists today are all about boundaries, aren't they? Boundaries are good. Sometimes we need to put some distance between ourselves and some unhealthy situations. That is what Paul is saying here. When you have a slacker in the congregation, don't just ignore it, but take steps to isolate that behavior before it spreads.

And skipping down to verses 14-15, if the slacker doesn't obey the instruction given in this letter, this needs to be taken to the whole church, and the entire church is to avoid associating with that particular brother, ***“so that he will be put to shame.”*** We almost hate to think in those terms, but this is a serious matter, Paul says. We aren't to hate the man, but we are to admonish or warn him as a brother. We might describe this as a “slacker intervention.” The church as a whole is to confront the man about this behavior – get a job! And if he refuses, we are to back away slowly so that the laziness does not spread to the rest of us.

Now, obviously, all of this applies to those of us in the church. But there does seem to be some wisdom here when it comes even to friends that we have in the world. If all of my friends are hanging out doing nothing all day, if my friends do nothing but play video games, if my friends do nothing but hang out at the food court in the mall, if my friends do nothing but get in trouble, then I probably need some new friends. Laziness is contagious.

IV. **As we come to the end of this passage, I would make one more observation here, and that is: NO MATTER WHAT OTHER PEOPLE MIGHT DO AROUND US, WE ARE NOT TO GET DISCOURAGED.**

As Paul says in verse 13, *“But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.”* And that is an interesting command to come right after a paragraph like this one, *“Do not grow weary of doing good.”* The church in Thessalonica had a problem. Some were hard workers, and they were sacrificing some of their hard-earned income to subsidize some other members who were able but unwilling to work. That’s the way it was. This is what was happening. We think today about maybe giving money to somebody on the street, only to have that person walk in a store to buy cigarettes. Not good! We have taken money away from our family, only to see it abused. We have the potential for some hard feelings. Paul, then, has to come in to straighten this mess out. And again, this was his third time – once in person, once in his first letter, and now in his second letter. In other words, this was an ongoing problem – the church was continually providing food for some who were undisciplined busybodies.

I realize we’ve been focusing on the slacker side of the equation this morning. But think about this from the point of view of those who were working. The danger is that the providers will ultimately become calloused over time. And we face the same danger today. There are times when we are called on to provide financial help and even food, but later we find out that we have been scammed, we find out that we have been cheated, we find out that we have been taken advantage of. The danger is that our hearts may have a tendency to become hardened over time. And the next time we are called on to help somebody, we are skeptical, we are cynical, we hear the story, and we don’t believe it. Most people have no idea the kind of calls that come in on the church line. Everybody needs something, everybody has a story, and often the stories are bogus. And so the danger is: Over time, it is easy for our hearts to become hardened to genuine needs. Paul, therefore, ends with some encouragement, *“Do not grow weary of doing good.”* Do not let the slackers keep you from helping those who really need it.

Conclusion:

As we close, I want to thank the good brother who asked the question. I am hoping that Paul was able to answer that for you this morning! As we always do, we want to end with an invitation to obey the good news. The good news is that Jesus came to this earth to die in our place. He was buried, but came back from the dead early on Sunday morning. We respond to God’s grace with loving, faithful obedience. We turn away from sin, we confess our belief in Jesus as being God’s Son, and then we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ, dipped in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, we hope you will pull any of us aside after today’s service, give us a call, send a message – whatever. But if you are ready to become a Christian right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com