

November 7, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

Do Not Grow Weary in Doing Good

2 Thessalonians 3:4 – 18

I must begin this morning with an apology. I gave you a reference last week that if you weren't paying attention, must have at the very least confused you a little. I was referencing the passage where Jesus tells His disciples '*As the Father has sent Me; I also send you.*' And I gave the address as John 21:21, which if you followed those instruction would have led you to the passage that says, *When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?"* But I know that most of you probably went ahead and found the right passage anyway which is John 20:21. I trust you are diligently searching the Scriptures to see if what I am saying is true or not – if you're not, then you probably just stopped at John 21:21 and wondered what in the world I was thinking.

At any rate, I hope you weren't bamboozled by the wrong Scripture reference and understood the point of the message. We focused on verse 3 of chapter 3: *But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one*, and we understand that God is irrevocably committed and faithful to the triumph of His purpose in the world. The fact that He is faithful does not speak to our comfort, our ease, our being free of trouble and toil in this life. *But the Lord is faithful* speaks to the fact that He will overcome all the resistance and rebellion that evil and wicked men do in their attempt to stifle the spread of the gospel in the world as we pray for His word to speed ahead and be honored. It also means that in spite of everything that comes at us to dislodge us from the faith, to destabilize our foundation, to terrify us and cause us to lose hope – the Lord will establish and strengthen us in that very thing so that His purpose for us will be fulfilled and our lives will resound to His glory. And finally it means that He will guard our hearts and our minds from losing the hope of our salvation and keep us from ultimately being lost in spite of every effort by the evil one.

We ended by pointing out three things that flow from this: **(1) Every follower of Jesus Christ has been saved by God to make the glory of God known in all the earth – that is our commission and that is our mission. Anything less than that is a waste. (2) We know that the gospel will triumph and God will make His glory known on the earth; and (3) finally, God will establish us and guard us against anything that threatens the fulfillment of that purpose.**

And then Paul continues: *And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.* 2 Thessalonians 3:4 The things we command refer back to the command in verse one where Paul told them to pray for he and Timothy and Silvanus as they worked to bring the gospel to more and more people; but it is also an intro to the next section where Paul gets into their business so to speak. He has just spent two chapters and a bit on reminding them of their election and calling by God, encouraging them in their suffering to endure and persevere in the gospel, teaching them about the soon coming of Christ with His angels in flaming fire to grant relief to the saints and retribution to sinners, warning them about the man of lawlessness and urging them to stand firm in holiness and the truth through all of this.

And then he concludes this short section with these words: *May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.* 2 Thessalonians 3:5 Paul prays that the Lord would direct their hearts to two things: the love of God and the steadfastness or endurance of Christ. If we are going to be those whose lives are wholly spent in for the cause of Christ and the sake of the gospel, we need our hearts directed to the **love of God and the endurance of Christ.**

The word translated *direct* is *kateuthuno*, and it literally means **to make straight**. But it also has the idea of **the removal of any hindrances to make it a straight line**. So Paul is praying that God would remove anything that would hinder the saints from knowing and embracing the love of God and anything that would hinder their endurance. Remember these saints were undergoing suffering and persecution at the hands of evil and wicked men and the temptation in times like that, or indeed in any time trouble rears its head in our lives, is to conclude that God really doesn't love us that much. And then the temptation when things are tough and we don't sense the love of God is to not endure and throw in the towel. So Paul prays that they would not only know the love of God but have the endurance that Christ displayed as He persevered all the way to the cross.

And then Paul gets into their stuff. *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 However elevated Paul's theology was, it never left the ground. The fact that we have been chosen and called and are being transformed by His Holy Spirit and the word and we are living our lives for the cause of Christ in the world should translate into real-life holiness. As we read these verses this morning, what you should have understood was that there were some in the church in Thessalonica that for whatever reason, were not working and were walking in idleness.

The word translated **idleness** is really better understood as **unruly**, because it means *disorderly, out of ranks, like unruly soldiers, deviating from the prescribed order or rule*. What Paul is saying is that those who were not gainfully employed were not only idle, but that idleness was like a soldier who doesn't obey orders. In short, rebellious. Now he was not talking about those who wanted to work but couldn't for one reason or another. He was addressing those who wouldn't work.

Apparently Timothy had brought back a report that indicated that there were a number of pious idlers, men and women who were either too busy with spiritual things to stoop to menial labor, or they were simply too lazy to work. And with all that time on their hands they had become meddling busybodies. And Paul says, 'Stay away from those who walk that way'. In fact it was much stronger than that. When he commanded, *in the name of our Lord Jesus*, that was equivalent to saying that Paul was speaking on behalf of the Lord Jesus. In other words, it was God saying this to the Thessalonians – **stay away from those people!** That may sound harsh on the one hand, but on the other this is the word of God so we dare not water it down or explain it away. To say keep away from those who walk this way is the same as saying remove yourself from any contact with them. As a community of believers who follow Christ, don't have anything to do with those who say they are Christians but refuse to work.

Why is idleness and refusing to work dealt with in such a serious way? **It is serious because what is at stake is the glory of Christ.** The person, nature and character of Christ was being dishonored and diminished by their laziness. The Christ they were supposed to be making much of through the gospel and in their lives was being held up to ridicule by their actions. I believe that what these believers lacked, as do many believers today, is a biblical world view of work.

Most of the world views work as a necessary evil, and you should pursue whatever means you can use to avoid it. Just think of the bumper stickers you see: 'I owe, I owe, its off to work I go' or 'I'd rather be golfing' or 'The worst day of fishing is always better than the best day at work'. How many have ever seen a bumper sticker that says, 'I'd rather be working' or 'Thank God it's Monday'? That is because as a rule, most people do not have a God-inspired view of work. Their view of work has been shaped by the world and not by the word of God. **God's word tells us that work or labor was in the plan of God from the start.**

In the beginning, God created man and set him in a garden, and put him to work. *'Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate [work] it and keep it.* Genesis 2:15 The plan of God from the beginning was that man would be employed, that we would have satisfying and fulfilling labor. The problem came in with the Fall however, and the labor that was to be satisfying and fulfilling suddenly became full of blood, sweat and tears. And the ground that once grew only good stuff, was cursed with thorns and thistles. But work itself was never cursed. We are the ones who curse work, not God. Far from being a curse, work is actually a glorious privilege. It flows out of the heart of God Himself, who labored six days to bring the world into existence, stamped His inventive and energetic image upon mankind, and placed Adam in the garden to tend it, beautify it, and increase its productivity.

The work of man, then, while suffering all the negative effects of the fall, **is nevertheless a mirror-image of the work of God.** It is designed to be a source of joy so fulfilling and wonderful that the Lord deemed it necessary to give us the fourth commandment in order to insure that we would set our work aside and rest at least one day a week! Which implies that the other side of viewing work as a necessary evil is just as bad – that is where we worship work instead of the God who created work. And many in our culture do just that. Just as there are alcoholics, and chocaholics, there are workaholics whose view of work is just as distorted as those who don't like it at all. Listen to how the Bible describes work: *Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting : to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his portion. Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his portion and rejoice in his labor ; this is the gift of God.* Ecclesiastes 5:18-19 **Work, or labor then is a gift from God.**

You cannot take a low view of work when you understand that work not only is a gift from God but that it mirrors and images the work of God Himself. **God Himself is working.** He is working to uphold all things by the word of His power as the Bible tells us in Colossians. He is preserving and sustaining all life; and the reason all our atoms don't go flying off into disorganized confusion is because He is working to keep everything going. If He ever decided to take a vacation from that work, we'd be in deep trouble. His work is seen in His sovereign planning and control of all events as He orchestrates every detail in the universe to accomplish His purpose. Jesus said of the Father and Himself in John 5: *"My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working."* John 5:17 So it is clear that we need to have a God-centered, exalted view of work that glorifies God.

The problem with the lazy crowd in Thessalonica was that their disdain and low view of work did not glorify God and make much of Him in the world. And Paul says, 'That's not what we taught you. In fact when we were with you we demonstrated just the opposite': *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 As an apostle and preacher of the gospel, Paul had a right to be supported by the Thessalonians, but in order to help the Thessalonians get a biblical world view he chose to work two jobs instead, in the word and in the world. *It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.* 2 Thessalonians 3:9

The gospel is eminently practical. The fact that we have been chosen and called and are being transformed by His Holy Spirit and the word and we are living our lives for the cause of Christ in the world should translate into working well and working hard at our jobs. Because ultimately our work glorifies the God who saved us and demonstrates God to a watching world. Paul told the Corinthians: *Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God* 1 Corinthians 10:31 **Everything, and especially work, is done to the glory of God.** It is His name and fame that are at stake in our lives.

One of the things the west has discovered after the breakup of the old Soviet Union, is that the Christians there are setting a model for work. Seventy-five years of atheism in the former Iron Curtain countries have produced a non-working population. They don't have any reason to work. There is no God to please. There is no transcendent ethic and there is nothing to be gained from work because you can't increase what you get anyway, it's all doled out by the government. The combination of an atheistic mentality and no personal benefit has stripped them of any motivation whatsoever. But now as these countries emerge from the bars, as it were, of their prison, they are recognizing that the people who work and who know how to work and work diligently are Christians and the government is setting up Christians as the model. Its even been put in print over there, **"Watch Christians, they know how to work. They have a transcendent ethic."**

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 Evidently this wasn't the first time Paul had given this command, and here he is emphasizing it again. One of the problems of his day was that labor was regarded as a slave issue – slaves worked and masters commanded. This wrong view of work was creeping into the church, and indeed as we look at church history we find that by the fourth century, labor in the workplace of the world was regarded as second-best. One church historian, Eusebius, wrote: **"There are two ways of life given by the law of Christ to His church. One is above nature and beyond common human living, holy and permanently separate from the common customary life of man. It devotes itself to the service of God alone. Such is the perfect form of the Christian life. And the other, the second more humble, more human, permits man to have minds for farming, for trade and the other secular interests and a kind of secondary grade of piety is attributed to them,"** Eusebius would have gone hungry under Paul's ministry. Paul's command was simple – 'No workee – no eatee!'

Not only was he concerned that the Thessalonians were engaged in God-exalting and God-honoring work in the world to make much of Him before the pagans, Paul's view of work was that **it prevented a lot of sin from happening:** *For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.* 2 Thessalonians 3:11 Instead of being busy at work, some of the Thessalonians were busy at making trouble. Work is a gift from God to engage our minds and hands with meaningful labor which avoids the idleness that leads to sin. You can see that in our culture today. The more technology has reduced workloads and created more space for selfish pursuits, the more corrupt they become. Just one example. The virtual explosion of pornographic content on the internet, on the television, in major public advertisements coincides with a shrinking commitment to work. All our free time is filled up with things that feed the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life.

Paul's solution is to go back to the original intent of God in work: *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 The command and encouragement is to **work quietly and earn your own living**. Now we understand that there are those who for legitimate reasons cannot do that, and we are admonished by Scripture to help take care of their needs. Perhaps some are sidelined by medical issues, or they are temporarily unemployed through no fault of their own, but the command and encouragement are clear to those who are otherwise able – work and earn your living. Like you, I have seen those ragged people at the stoplights on the freeway offramps with the signs that say, 'Anything will help, God bless you' and have even stopped and offered them some food. But I have come to realize that they don't want food, or clothes or shelter or any of those things. What they want is money and they want to not have to work for it. Ironically, they probably work harder than a lot of people at not working.

But then Paul interjects a word to the majority of those in the church who are working: *As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.* 2 Thessalonians 3:13 **Do not grow weary in doing good.** There is the danger that those who have this God-centered biblical view of labor and work to glorify God in all they do, will become jaded and fed up with the lazy ones so that when someone with a legitimate need comes to them they are met with massive indifference. That is a real danger – it can happen. I remember a few years ago when we took a homeless family in here at the church. They had quite a story and it sounded good and our hearts were touched by their plight. Kim and I even took them into our home for a while and gave them food and clothes and money and helped arrange job interviews. One family here donated the use of their camping trailer and the church provided lots of help. But it soon became apparent that this was a lifestyle they had chosen and they weren't interested in climbing out of poverty and homelessness and we finally had to tell them, 'No work – no eats'. There was the danger for us at that point to become callous and indifferent to others in the same situation. But Paul tells us that in spite of those who take advantage of us, don't become weary in doing the noble thing.

However, Paul does not say that those in the church who sponge off others, who are too lazy to work for a living, are simply to not get food from those who do work. He is much stronger in his discipline than that: Paul says, *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 Remember back in verse six Paul said to not associate with these kind of people. As a community of believers who follow Christ, don't have anything to do with those who say they are Christians but refuse to work. Here he emphasizes the alienation of those who are disobedient to this word so that they may be ashamed. Evidently, **well-placed shame is a great motivator to change** in Paul's view.

That is exactly the opposite view of the world that says, 'Don't make people feel ashamed. It damages their self-image'. What the world and the church is lacking today is well-placed shame. Well-placed shame is the shame you feel when there is good reason to feel it. Biblically that means we feel ashamed of something because our involvement in it was dishonoring to God. And here Paul says that those who won't work should be alienated from the community of believers, for the purpose of shaming them into obedience to the word of God. It is not shaming them for the sake of shame alone, but rather for the redemptive purpose of reclaiming them as brothers and sisters in Christ. *Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.* 2 Thessalonians 3:15

This is not war, this is love – warn him as a brother. **Warn in love.** Say to him, 'Your laziness is dishonoring to God and a poor testimony of Christ in the world. Don't revile Christ by your unwillingness to work – make much of Him by working hard and proving the glory of His grace in you.' Love for one another should compel us to do the hard thing with those who walk disobedient to the word. Here is another place where we should not grow weary but persevere in doing good – the good being working for the redemption of our brothers.

And then Paul closes as always with blessings of grace and peace: *Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all. I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.* 2 Thessalonians 3:16-18 At this point in the letter, Paul takes the pen from his scribe and writes in his own hand, probably for a couple of reasons. The first being his desire to demonstrate his own love and concern for the Thessalonians, and secondly, to distinguish his genuine letters from the fake letters floating around. But his concluding thought is that we need the peace of God and the grace of God to embrace and live out the gospel in our daily lives. I find it telling that in every letter, Paul gives the peace of God and the grace of God such front and center attention. I think that is because for us as Christians to live lives that reflect the glory of God and impact the world for the cause of Christ, we need to be at peace with God and one another, and we need His grace to empower us to not grow weary in doing good.

Our gracious Father,

Grant that our highest ambition would be to make Your glory known in the earth. Establish us and strengthen us against anything that would hinder us from living for Your glory. Direct our hearts to the love of God and the endurance of Christ. Don't let us be sidetracked by trivial pursuits; don't let us be seduced by the temporary pleasures of this life; forbid Lord that all our labor would terminate on our desires but grant that we would work and live with Your purpose in view. May all our labor be to make much of Christ and magnify His worth in the world, and may we live to delight ourselves in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people, we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord.