

HISTORY AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

2 THESSALONIANS 3:6–18



If anyone is not willing to work,
let him not eat.”

“So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thessalonians 3:15).

2 THESSALONIANS 1–3

Several decades ago the liberal skeptic Rudolph Bultmann wrote that “the question of meaning in history has become meaningless.” While it is easy for any but the most skeptical to see significance in the momentous geopolitical changes of recent months and years, many today would still generally agree with Bultmann’s assertion.

Neither the Christian faith nor the book of 2 Thessalonians, however, would agree. One thing that sets Christianity apart from most other systems of belief is that the Scriptures clearly show history is meaningful since there is a plan, a goal toward which everything is inexorably moving. This, of course, stands in stark contrast to the more common paganistic views that all history is cyclical and chaotic with no rhyme or reason.

When Paul wrote of the end of history to the young Thessalonian church, he was not expounding systematic doctrine in an academic vacuum. He was addressing a real situation in the local church, answering questions that were related to what people were facing day to day. The concerns in this second letter were basically threefold.

First, the Thessalonian believers continued to suffer persecution (2 Thess. 1:4). Probably at this point they were asking Paul why they were suffering and how long it would endure. The short answer Paul gave was that God is just and eventually, even if not in this life, He will make things right (1:5–10).

The second issue they faced was the presence of false teachers. Such people had tried to lead the people astray from their roots with false documents purportedly from Paul (2:1–2). Paul’s response was unequivocal: “Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way” (2:3a). After explaining in more precision the answer to their question, he emphasized that they should hold to what they were taught in the beginning and not follow new contradictory schemes (2:13–17).

Finally, the church was dealing with “idlers” (3:6–15). Paul expanded beyond his brief mention in the first letter (1 Thess. 5:14) to admonish all in the church to work tirelessly for the kingdom, not taking advantage of others’ efforts.¹

¹Devotional by RC Sproul found at <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/history-and-the-christian-faith/>

CORAM DEO

All three of these types of problems still exist in the church today. Determine to stand strong in the face of persecution. Beware of false teachers — be discerning whom you follow. Resist the temptation to be idle. Pray that when the kingdom comes you will be found faithfully working the field God has given you.²

OPEN IT

1. Describe your average work day (whether in the home or workplace). What does it involve? What tasks do you enjoy? What would you rather not have to do?

READ 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6–18

EXPLORE IT

2. Who does Paul command the Thessalonians to stay away from?
3. In verses 7–9, how did Paul “put his money where his mouth is” when it came to idleness?
4. What command does Paul give the Thessalonians in verse 10?
5. What should we not grow weary in doing?

²Devotional by RC Sproul found at <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/history-and-the-christian-faith/>

6. How does Paul prove that he is the writer of the letter?

GET IT

Our final study in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians deals with **the value of work**. It is a rather strange subject for Sunday worship, but one that we should find profitable.

If you have ever gone into any of the Charlie Brown restaurants in this area you will have seen displayed somewhere the words, "Work is the curse of the drinking class." That is clearly a reversal of the old maxim, "Drink is the curse of the working class."

Many people think of work as a kind of curse, something that has been imposed upon man because of the Fall. **But work is really a blessing, though we tend to forget that at times.** The "flower children" of the '60's got the idea that work was something they did not need, and that a good living would somehow fall out of the sky upon them. Many of them dropped out of the rat race, went out in the countryside and tried to live without working.

In every day and age, there are freeloaders who want to live off someone else's work. Today we are cursed with welfare abusers who take money from the government with no thought of working on their part. They are perfectly able to work, but they will not do so.

It is interesting that we have, two thousand years later, the same problem they had in the city of Thessalonica. There were certain people in the church there who refused to work.

Some scholars have felt that they were doing so because they expected the Lord Jesus to return at any moment. Here again is one of the strange phenomena that has assailed the Christian testimony through the centuries. There is always a lunatic fringe who want to push too far the hope of our Lord's return. They use the promise of His coming to develop some kind of far-out activity that brings disrepute upon that doctrine....

Recently I heard of a man who actually bought a new Cadillac which he could not afford. He managed to get the down payment together and bought the car thinking that he would never have to make another payment because the Lord's return was imminent.

The apostle does not say what was causing the Thessalonians to stop working, but he faces the fact of it. It may have been that they were living in a kind of a Christian commune together, sharing the labor and the food, etc. In the book of Acts there is a reference to the early Christians, saying, "there was none among them who lacked, for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds and laid them at the apostle's feet and they distributed to each as anyone had need" (cf, Acts 4:34-35). Historians do not feel that condition obtained long in the early church, but that may have been the case in this pioneer church in Thessalonica. **At any rate there were some people who had decided not to work anymore, and they were living off the good will and kindness of others.** Paul has a word for the church about them in 2 Thessalonians 3:6.³

7. Ray Stedman shares in the previous statement that "work is really a blessing, though we tend to forget that at times." Do you see work as a blessing? What enables you to see this blessing, or what keeps you from such a perspective?

³ Sermon by Ray Stedman "Is work a curse?" found @ http://www.pbc.org/system/message_files/5329/4100.html

8. How can separating one's work life from one's spiritual life be counterproductive to God's purpose and plan for you as a believer?
9. In what practical ways can a Christian have an impact in the workplace? How might a Christian work ethic cause others at work to be interested in the gospel?

The second reason the apostle gives for this rather severe demand to withdraw from people who will not work is because it deliberately ignores the apostle's own example.

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, we did not eat any one's bread without paying, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you. It was not because we have not that right, but to give you in our conduct an example to imitate (2 Thess. 3:7–9 RSV).

It is very helpful to remember that these great men of God who taught us all these marvelous truths in the Scripture were not isolated from the ordinary working world, but were involved in it. Paul had every right, he says, to cease from work. Jesus had said, "The laborer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7b KJV), i.e., if someone preaches and teaches you spiritual truth, he has the right to expect to be supported in order to have time for his ministry. This is the whole reasoning behind having pastors who are paid salaries. The apostle recognizes this. He says, "Yes, I have that right, but I chose not to do it." Why? "Because I did not want to be a burden to anybody."⁴

10. Paul demonstrated that the Christian life is one that is devoted to working hard both in the church and in the world. Why must church leaders be an example in this way?

11. Where did you learn about the concept of hard work? Who has served as an example of what it looks like to honor God through one's work?

Keep away from people who refuse to work, says the apostle. Do not have anything to do socially with people like that. But not only withdraw, he says, withhold food from them.

For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If anyone will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. (2 Thess. 3:10–11 RSV).

⁴ Sermon by Ray Stedman "Is work a curse?" found @ http://www.pbc.org/system/message_files/5329/4100.html

Notice that it is not, "if any cannot work," but, "if any will not work." People who cannot work because there is no work, also need our help. Paul is not talking about such conditions. But even today there are always a few who could work, but are deliberately keeping away from it because they have found it is easier to beg, or to rip off someone with a clever story.

Hardly a week goes by here at this church but that we have people coming by asking us for help. Just last Sunday a man approached me after the service and asked me to give him some money. He told a heartrending story about how his family was suffering. It was impossible for me to check on it so I could not tell whether he was telling the truth or not. I gave him a little money because I always remember the words of the Lord in the Sermon on the Mount, "Give to him that asks of you, and do not withhold," (cf, Matt 5:32). But I often wonder if people like this do not fall into the category that Paul is dealing with here. If we can find out that they could work, but they do not choose to work, then we are to hold back from helping them, even by giving them food, says the apostle...

...The reason the apostle says to take this drastic action – to let them starve if they are not really willing to work – is because he wanted to prevent something worse. He says people who will not work become busybodies, i.e. meddlers, people who concern themselves with other people's affairs. Such people try to get involved with things they have no business getting involved with, and go around generally stirring up difficulty and trouble. Those who will not work, if they are not busy, become busybodies! This is the point he is making.

Someone has said those people who are willing to work are like mules: When they are pulling they cannot kick, and when they are kicking they cannot pull.⁵

12. Paul seems very forthright when he says "If he is unwilling to work let him not eat." Do you agree with his bold assertion? How are we to apply such a statement to our own times and culture?

13. How does this passage on the importance of everyone's working balance with our present welfare system? How might Paul advise our civic leaders when it comes to the issue of unemployment and welfare?

Paul directly addresses these people in Verse 12:

Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ [again, the authority of Christ] to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. (2 Thess. 3:12 RSV).

There is no misunderstanding of these words. "You can work," says the apostle. "You have an able body and a good mind. Now, go to work and earn your own living." It is a serious matter when you do not work. Those who refuse to do so are not allowing themselves to be fulfilled in the way God intended. They are cheating others as well, and they are keeping busy only by meddling in other people's affairs.

There is a proverb that comes to mind in this regard: "He that passes by and meddles with something belonging not to him is like one who takes hold of a dog by the ears," (cf, Proverbs 26:17). Imagine grabbing a pit bull by the ears! That is what the book of Proverbs says meddlers are risking!⁶

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14. When the issue of laziness or idleness comes to mind, we are quick to look at young people and attribute such an attitude to them. How can we help the younger people around us to live out this scriptural command about working hard?

15. What unique temptations do young people have today that make them prone to be idle in life?

The apostle goes on to counsel the leadership of the church on how to handle problems like these. He lists four things:

Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing.

If anyone refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother (2 Thess. 3:13–15 RSV).

- **First, do not give up on them.** That is because they really are brothers. Do not be impatient. Spend a little time working on this. That is what he is saying. "Do not be weary in well-doing."
- **Second, do not evade a confrontation:** "note that man." Do not just hope that the problem will pass away and so do nothing about it. Take note of it.
- **Third, try to make him feel ashamed of himself.** Everyone has a conscience, that little voice inside that protests when we do not fulfill what we were intended to do or be. We may not admit it, but we know inside us that there is something wrong. Therefore, Scripture addresses its appeal always to the conscience, to the inner witness that will urge us to do it. Paul's advice is to make him feel ashamed of freeloading, of depending on others for food that he requires but is unwilling to do anything about himself.
- **And, fourth, do not carry it too far.** Do not make him feel like an enemy. Do not make him feel that he is not even a Christian. He is a brother confused, and he needs help, but he is not an unbeliever.

16. Why is such a response to an idle believer necessary and right? How can such a response cause an individual to become more productive in both work and life?

In closing, as he does in so many of his letters, he says,

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all (2 Thess. 3:17 RSV).

We learn from other letters that Paul apparently had trouble with bad eyes. He tells us in the letter to the Galatians that when he came among them at first that they would have given him their own eyes if they could have. Many feel that his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7) was poor eyesight. Perhaps he even had some disfigurement that made him look bad to others. Thus, when he wrote letters he usually dictated them to a secretary, one of the men who traveled with him. But when he came to the close of his letters he would take the pen from the hand of the secretary,

and, as he tells us in another place, write with large letters these words, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." That, he says, is the mark of authenticity in his letters.

It is more than that. It is also the mark that these letters are the very Word of God itself. The apostle everywhere made claim to the fact that the doctrines that he taught, the facts that he imparted, the advice and counsel that he gave, were not his own. It came from the Lord. It was inspired. It was God himself speaking through the man. Even in that early day people were imitating that. The devil is quick to counterfeit something. They were writing letters, supposedly from Paul, and signing his name to them. But when he wrote with large letters the words, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all," that, he said, is the mark of genuineness; no one can imitate this. When you get a letter like that, says Paul, you know it is written by me.

By the way, many of the liberal scholars reject this Second Thessalonian letter as being from Paul because they do not like what it teaches. But here is the mark, in this most challenged of his writings, that it is a letter from the apostle himself. All of this, then, rests upon the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. What would we do without that to live today?

The apostle has made his appeal to us to keep working, to occupy until the Lord comes, to face the problems of life, and to handle them all with the sense that the Lord of peace himself will give us peace in all ways and at all times.⁷

What better benediction could we ask!

17. Paul closes his letter by reminding us that each day for the believer is contingent on God's grace. What new aspects of God's grace have you learned about or experienced through your study of 1 and 2 Thessalonians?

18. Have these letters and the interaction with your small group given you a greater measure of God's peace amidst a world of conflict and chaos? If so, how?

⁷ Sermon by Ray Stedman "Is work a curse?" found @ http://www.pbc.org/system/message_files/5329/4100.html