

2 Thessalonians 3:6–13

Warning against Idleness

6 Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, 8 and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you.

9 This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. 10 For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. 11 For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.

12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. 13 Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

MESSAGE

Those who don't work don't eat. This is a pretty harsh teaching by Paul. It seems at odds with much of what we read in the bible.

Throughout the Hebrew Testament we are regularly reminded to help widows, children, and travelers. There is no mention of work, we are not to assess their worthiness before we help them. We are simply to open our arms, hearts, homes, and wallets to them.

They don't earn our help – they don't have to work for it. 'Remember that you were once homeless, penniless travellers yourselves,' said God. 'Don't withhold from those in need, for by helping strangers you may well be helping angels in disguise.'

Jesus also set a strong example of selfless giving without condition. It seemed that every time Jesus encountered someone who had a need he was filled with compassion. I never heard of him turning anybody away because he considered them to be unworthy – it was always the same pattern: Jesus sees a human being lacking something; his heart melts; he listens/heals/feeds that person.

We remember the wedding feast parable in which Jesus speaks of gathering all the dregs of society off the street and sitting them down in fine clothes at a lavish celebratory banquet.

And who can forget Jesus' 'Do unto others' speech? Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.

It would appear that the Old and New Testaments are in agreement: we are to give to those in need. Period. No qualifications or conditions. If we see a need, we are to meet it – end of story.

So what's up with Paul then? No work – no food. That's not how Jesus put it. Truth be told, I think most of us prefer Paul's teaching over Jesus' when we are the ones being asked to help.

If I listen to Jesus, your hunger becomes my problem. If I listen to Paul, then your hunger is your problem. See how easy that is? If you're poor, that's your fault. No work, no bread, and no complaining about it.

For many of us this is an attractive tenet. For all the places in the bible that we are admonished to give to the poor, we can wave around this one verse that lets us off the hook. We don't have to give to the lazy, and if someone is poor they must be lazy, so *ipso facto* we can just tuck our wallets back in our pockets and turn away.

Only it's not that simple. Laziness and poverty do not go hand in hand quite the way that we think. One of the foundational myths in our culture is that hard work results in material success. If you put in the effort, you will get the rewards. Unfortunately, that is a myth. It is not actually true in any demonstrable sense.

It is true that hard work is necessary for success – unless you have a very rich relative or win a lottery you will not be handed wealth, property, or position. Hard work is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Hard work alone does not in any way guarantee success. There are plenty of people working very hard at dangerous, low paying jobs who will never in their lives buy a new car, go on a Caribbean cruise, or go to bed without worrying about the future.

I spent many years working nights in dimly lit smoky factories – heavy labour, dangerous chemicals, molten metal, exposed induction coils carrying tens of thousands of volts of electricity. Hard work. For all that hard work I earned \$8 an hour. That means making impossible choices between the gas bill and groceries.

The truth is that hard work does not guarantee that there will be food on the table. We can't automatically assume that a lack of bread is the result of a lack of effort.

So how then do we determine if someone is worthy of our giving? There are people who are unable to work - certainly we should be helping them – but how are we to ascertain who is deserving? We don't know what is going on in other people's lives, and honestly we don't really care to. When we're faced with someone who is asking us for something we don't want to hear their story. We merely want to get to the end of the question – to the part where we say no and then get on with our day.

We don't know their situation, their history, their ability. We don't know if they are working or not – maybe they are working but need to work harder. Maybe they are working but are spending their money unwisely. How do we judge?

I would say that we don't judge – that's not our role. I think that Jesus' words stand – give to all who ask of you. I would suggest that when Paul wrote about idleness and those unwilling to

work not eating he did intend for his listeners to use his words to inform their giving. Paul was not writing to the givers – he was writing to the receivers. We are not to apply his words to other people, but to ourselves.

Paul was writing to a group of believers who were waiting for the end times. Because they had been suffering through a time of persecution by the authorities, Paul had written to reassure them of the hope that Christ would re-appear and set up his new kingdom. The church in Thessalonica were expecting Jesus any day – so much so that many of the members simply gave up on working. What's the point, they thought, if all this will be wrapped up in the next few weeks or months.

Not only did some of them give up on their day jobs, but they also gave up on their jobs in the church community. They continued to come to the Lord's supper expecting to be well fed, but they didn't contribute anything toward it. They didn't donate food or wine, they didn't help prepare, they didn't help set up or clean up. All they brought with them was a sense of entitlement. They are moochers.

As typically happens when people have little to do, these people began meddling in the affairs of others. Not only did they not contribute, but they actively destroyed by sitting on the sidelines telling others how things should be. They all had opinions on what kind of wine should be served, who should sit next to whom, what sorts of hymns should be sung and at what tempo.

Most translations read that these people 'won't do any work except the work of a busybody;' the New Testament Greek is literally, 'not working but working-around.' These days we might say these people are working the system rather than working a job.

What the moochers and busybodies have in common is attitude: what is thine is mine. They don't have good boundaries and think they are entitled to all that comes their way – money, food, recognition, information. Neither contributes to the wellbeing of the community.

In fact, the moochers and busybodies are a drain on Christ's church, as well as fomenters of disharmony. In this church, as in all churches, there are plenty of people – most people really – who work hard. Some work a job all day and then come and volunteer: singing, planning, building, cleaning, cooking, praying, giving financially – there are many contributors and many contributions that make St. Paul's the witness of Christ that it is. But there are also some church members who sit back and let others do the work and meet the costs, while they take advantage of the principles of love and hospitality on which the church was built. Not everyone contributes to the upkeep and mission of the church as they are able; they somehow expect that the church will always be there for them when and as they wish.

Of course this kind of attitude places an extra burden on those who are contributing; it is a self-centred attitude and it is a contravention of the commandment to love our neighbours as

ourselves. But the irony is that even though the behaviour seems to be selfish and self-serving, it back-fires. It does not benefit the self, but actually disadvantages the person who does it.

This is what Paul really meant when he wrote that those who do not work shall not eat. It is not a command, it is a consequence. It is descriptive, not prescriptive.

We can mooch sandwiches – we can also mooch spiritually. It is easy to sit in the pew week after week, but doing no work ourselves. The preacher will tell me what the bible says, the congregation will do my praying for me. But if you will not work, you will not eat. If you do not read the bible for yourself, if you do not have your own prayer time, no one else can do it for you. You will not be fed, you will not grow, you will not mature as a Christian. You will neither comprehend nor experience what life in the Kingdom is like. It is not those who try to save their lives that find them – Jesus told us that those of us who lose our lives for the sake of the Kingdom will find them.

The church is a movement of faith in action. It is a group of people who share a common vision and strive to make it a reality through faithful obedience. Jesus' church consists of people with a goal. But that is not a place. The goal is transformation.

Because our destination is not a place, it does no good to become a stowaway. You can't get to where we are going simply by hitching onto the wagon. We are a community headed toward transformation through prayer and service – the core of St. Benedict's monastic order – *ora et labora*. If we don't pray and we don't serve, then we don't grow and we don't transform. There is no such thing as a free ride.

So it is true that those who don't work don't eat, because it is through our work that we are transformed. It is through our service that we become an integral part of our community, and not having a job within this faith community is not a blessing – it is a curse. Having no job means we have no place; we are redundant, unnecessary. We are not part of the transformation of self or world. When we hold back and let others do it all we will discover that we are not full members; we are merely tourists, hangers-on. It is a spiritually impoverished Christian who seeks to be served. Truly it is those who seek to lose their lives for Jesus' sake that will find them.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth 'When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult I put an end to childish ways.' Thinking that we can reap the benefits of the kingdom without participating as full members of a kingdom community is part of the childish thinking that Paul was referring to.

It is not enough to have an individual commitment to Jesus. That commitment must be lived out in the context of a community of faith, and in working together life is given direction, meaning and significance; our very capacity to do good things is increased when we all work together for a common purpose, each according to her abilities.

Those who won't work won't eat. Not a rule with which we judge others; a caution that we are to heed ourselves. Do we take and criticize, or do we contribute and build up? Does the church exist to serve me and satisfy my desires, or am I here to serve God and become the person God created me to be?

'Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right,' wrote Paul. For it is through our prayer and service that God will continue the good work that he started in us, and complete our transformation into witnesses of Jesus' love in Norfolk and beyond.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.