

## 2 Thessalonians 3 – Working Hard or Hardly Working?

### Introduction

Most of us go through our Christian lives with what can be referred to as “acceptable sins.” These particular sins are still dishonouring to Jesus, it’s just that we’ve come to tolerate them in our lives.

We tend to view our acceptable sins as *small* in comparison to all the other ills of society that we think a big and often focus on.

We tend to grow numb to our acceptable sins. They rarely scare us, convict us, or grieve our souls.

Our acceptable sins often go unchecked and unchanged, because we just don’t think they’re that serious.

One of the things, that I think often goes into the “acceptable sins” box is idleness – that tendency to be lazy, to avoid work and be productive. I suspect many of us might see aspects of idleness in our lives, shrug our shoulders and think: “It’s not that great, but not that serious.” Not the kind of thing we’d set up an accountability group for.

But what is so striking about this passage is just how seriously Paul treats the sin of idleness within the Thessalonian church. Five times he uses the language of “command/obey” to get his message across. Twice he invokes the authoritative name of Jesus. Paul thinks it’s so cancerous to the Christian community that he twice tells the believers to *stay away* from those who are idle.

Tonight, Jesus through his apostle Paul, is telling us that we need to take idleness and laziness seriously. Jesus is calling us to glorify Him with our day jobs and attitudes to work. And as the One who died for us, saved us, and now lovingly rules us, we should listen.

So what we’ll do is think about what Paul says about the idle believers in Thessalonica. Then I want to spend some time at the end thinking about how we can apply it to our lives today.

### Context.

But first, let’s recap on where we’ve been in this letter. For the past two chapters Paul has been dealing with two groups of people who were disturbing the Thessalonian church. The persecutors (chapter 1). And the False teachers (chapter 2).

Now by the time he gets to this last chapter, you might expect him to have a note of pessimism about their future in light of the challenges they’re facing. But, actually, it’s the opposite. He’s full of confident hope in what the Lord will keep on doing in and through them. Look at verse 1-5:

*3 In addition, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you, <sup>2</sup> and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not all have faith.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>3</sup> But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. <sup>4</sup> We have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. <sup>5</sup> May the Lord direct your hearts to God’s love and Christ’s endurance.*

Despite the real challenge of persecution and false teaching, Paul had confidence in the faithful God to help the Thessalonians stand firm. And as we’ll see, it’s this same confidence in God that Paul has when addressing a third group of people causing more issues for this church — the idlers.

Now why was idleness an issue for some in Thessalonica?

Some commentators believe it was the result of poor theology. The idea being that some had believed the message of the false teachers who were saying that said Jesus was either just about to return or had already returned. It is thought some believers basically thought: “why bother slaving away at my job if Jesus is about to return and take me into his eternal Kingdom?”

That could be the case, but Paul never directly makes that link.

While poor theology shapes poor conduct, it’s equally true that poor conduct can exist *without* poor theology.

Sinners don’t need dodgy teaching to be sinful. Sometimes we are just lazy!

Regardless of the specific reason here, Paul’s word’s *about* idleness remain vitally important for us today. So let’s think about the first word Paul has about idleness for the church as a whole.

### 1. A word to the church.

Look at verse 6:

<sup>6</sup>Now we command you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from every brother or sister who is idle and does not live<sup>20</sup> according to the tradition received from us...

“Keep away from the idle!” It sounds extreme doesn’t it?

I mean, we might get it if Paul had said keep away from every brother or sister who is a racist or a criminal or even a gossip... But idle? Isn’t that sort of person just a harmless couch potato? Now we’ll think a little more about Paul’s command to “keep away” when we get to a similar statement in verse 14.

But right now we simply need to get our heads around why God takes idleness so seriously. Or to put it positively, why He thinks *work* is such a good thing to do.

There are four major biblical reasons why God thinks work is so good:

1. It’s something we were created to do. At the beginning of creation, we read in Genesis 2:15:  
<sup>15</sup>The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden **to work it** and watch over it.  
Even before sin came into the picture work was given by God as a good gift. The curse of sin means that work is no longer easy, but it does not mean it is no longer good.

2. It brings glory to God. Giving ourselves to diligent, faithful labour is a big way we honour the Lord in our daily lives. Colossians 3:

<sup>23</sup>Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.

3. It loves your neighbour. Working to help others and drawing an income from your labour allows you to contribute to the needs of others – particularly those entrusted to your immediate care. This is vitally important. So much so that Paul will say to Timothy (1 Tim 5:8):

*Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

4. It is a gospel witness to the watching world. It shows the transformative nature of the gospel. It gives the world a chance to see that followers of Jesus take being productive members of society seriously, and they respect that. That’s why Paul tells the Thessalonians in his first letters to work with their hands (1 Thess 4:12):

<sup>12</sup>so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

When we embrace a life-style of idleness, all these good things get turned on their head.

- We’re rejecting God’s creational gift.
- We’re not giving him glory or loving our neighbour.
- We’re destroying the witness of Jesus’ transformative gospel.

Idleness displeases God. But faithful labour pleases Him. And that’s why Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the tradition (v.6), the hard-working lifestyle he had modelled to them while he was with them. Look at verses 7-9:

<sup>7</sup>For you yourselves know how you should imitate us: We were not idle among you; <sup>8</sup>we did not eat anyone’s food free of charge; instead, we labored and toiled, working night and day, so that we would not be a burden to any of you. <sup>9</sup>It is not that we don’t have the right to support, but we did it to make ourselves an example to you so that you would imitate us.

Paul had practiced what he is preaching here. Like any other gospel worker had the right to receive financial support for his ministry, but he had refused that right. Instead, he had added a part-time job to his preaching ministry to cover his living costs. We know from Acts 18:3 that Paul worked as a tentmaker in Corinth, so maybe he picked up some similar work in Thessolonica.

You can imagine him, teaching these new believers during the day, having a rest, then heading to the workshop to work a late-shift every other night. Paul could not be accused of being a moocher - the kind of person who always happens pop in around dinner time. “we did not eat anyone’s food free of charge” (v.8).

Paul says he did this so that church, (which we know was quite poor) would not be burdened. But also did it, to give them a real-life example of a Christ-like attitude to work and productivity. Idleness has no place in the community of Jesus people says Paul.. And that's why he gave them the rule of verse 10:

*"If anyone isn't **willing** to work, he should not eat."*

Now, notice what this rule isn't saying. It's not saying, "if anyone isn't able to work, he should not eat." This message isn't directed to the **willing but unable**. It's directed to the **able, but unwilling**.

There are all sort of reasons why some people are unable to work a regular job either full time or at all. Chronic illness, work injury or trauma, a full-time student, the elderly. That's not who Paul is talking about here. It's the able-bodied person, who *could* work, who *could* help out around the house, or in their community, but simply chooses not to. Paul wants that person not to be enabled to keep on sinning. He wants them to be confronted by the uncomfortable reality that they are the slacker of Proverbs 6 who is at risk of poverty:

*<sup>6</sup> Go to the ant, you slacker!*

*Observe its ways and become wise.*

*<sup>7</sup> Without leader, administrator, or ruler,*

*<sup>8</sup> it prepares its provisions in summer;  
it gathers its food during harvest.*

*<sup>9</sup> How long will you stay in bed, you slacker?  
When will you get up from your sleep?*

*<sup>10</sup> A little sleep, a little slumber,  
a little folding of the arms to rest,*

*<sup>11</sup> and your poverty will come like a robber,  
your need, like a bandit.*

Paul is saying in no uncertain terms that idleness has no place in the community of Jesus' people.

So that's his word to the church as a whole, but in verses 11-12 Paul narrows his focus and speaks directly to the small group of idlers themselves. Which leads us to the second point.

## **2. A word to the idle.**

It's never pleasant to get called out for having a bad work-ethic. I remember being on placement at a children's eye hospital in the US when I was training to be orthoptist. I didn't like this placement. I found the work draining and much more difficult than what I had done in Australia. And so it wasn't long before my poor attitude translated into poor behaviour. I'd linger between seeing patients. I'd get chatting to the people at the admin desk to fill in time. And if I saw the head doctor coming my way, I'd try and look busy. This was not a moment in life I am not proud of. And it so happened that the head ophthalmologist wasn't too impressed either when he caught wind of what was going on. I still remember him, walking straight up to me one day and saying: "I love how you pretend to work." And with that he walked off.

In that moment, I felt so ashamed, so humbled, so willing to change and work hard from that point forward.

Sometimes, we need an honest and direct word to give us the wake-up call we need. And that's what Paul gives to this group of idlers in verses 11-12:

*<sup>11</sup> For we hear that there are some among you who are idle. They are not busy but busybodies. <sup>12</sup> Now we command and exhort such people by the Lord Jesus Christ to work quietly and provide for themselves.*

Like the ophthalmologist, Paul calls it how he sees it. "Some of you guys are idle! "You're not busy, you're busybodies."

The more idle time a person has the more chance for meddling and mischief. This is basically what that awful TV series Big Brother depends on. Put a bunch of people in a house, give them nothing to do, and watch with fascination as they meddle in each other's lives. Idleness might create popular TV content, but it creates a perverse church community – if left unchecked.

So what is Paul's command to the idle? Get a job, keep out of trouble, and pay your own bills. "Working quietly really stands in contrast to being a loud mouth idle meddler."

And notice it's not really "Paul's solution" it's what the Lord Jesus commands. Paul says we command and exhort *by the Lord Jesus*.

Sometimes growing in spiritual maturity can be as simple as applying for a job on seek.com.

That's what Paul says to the idle minority. But to the faithful majority, Paul says, v.13:

<sup>13</sup> *But as for you, brothers and sisters, do not grow weary in doing good.*

In the context, I take "doing good" here, to mean working faithfully in their different jobs and roles. "Keep up the good work through your work."

Don't let anyone tell you your shelf-stacking at Coles is less than impressive. It's a great thing, in God's eyes. Your office job might be boring, but keep going. You diligent work in the home, that's a good thing. It all glorifies Jesus, loves your neighbour, and serves a great gospel witness. Do not grow weary in doing good.

No more mooching, no more meddling. It's time to do some honest work. That's Paul's word to the idle. But now, Paul narrows his focus even more. Now he deals with an even smaller group of individuals who may simply refuse to listen to this rebuke.

### **3. A Word about the disobedient – those "who will not obey".**

I'm sure you've heard the expression: "hoping for the best, preparing for the worst."

There is a little bit of that going in Paul's final comments here. He's hoping for the best, but preparing them for the worst.

Now, it must be said that Paul's hope is more than wishful thinking. He's confident that God will help his people in this area (v.4). But at the same time, Paul knows that sin is not always so easily rooted out. There may well be one or two, who simply refuse to give up their idle lifestyle. If that happens, you must be prepared for it says Paul. Verse 14:

<sup>14</sup> *If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take note of that person; don't associate with him, so that he may be ashamed.* <sup>15</sup> *Yet don't consider him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.*

Church discipline will never be pleasant, but it will sometimes be necessary. And I think there are three big guiding principles that come from Paul's words that should guide our response if we ever have to go there:

1. First, our response as a church must be just. It must follow *prior* instruction and warning. It would be wrong to publicly discipline someone who has never been taught or clearly or warned privately (Matt 18:15-17). But the sense in verse 14 is that these *are* people who have heard Jesus' clear teaching and refused the call to repent and obey (v.14).
2. Second, our response must be protective - safeguarding the well-being of other believers. The only other time Paul tells a congregation "not to associate" with someone as part of church discipline is when he's dealing with the sexually immoral man of 1 Cor 5. And part of his reasoning there (which I think is guiding his part of his thinking here) is that sin is easily spreads and does damage if left unchecked.

...*Don't you know that a little leaven<sup>[b]</sup> leavens the whole batch of dough?*

That's a proverb of Paul's day that refers to the way others can be led into the same sin and therefore more people negatively affected by. He's already mentioned the destructive mooching and meddling.

3. Third, our response must be restorative – aiming for the good of the individual involved. And that is the purpose of the shame mentioned in verse 14. Shame is never pleasant, and sometimes it's wrongly placed on us by those who have abused or used us. But sometimes it does serve as a helpful emotion. Like a fire-alarm in our hearts, sometimes it gives us the wake-up call we need – telling us something in our lives is not right and needs to change. That where Paul is coming from here. He is concerned for the individual. That's why he tells the congregation *not* to treat them like an enemy, but a brother.

There is to be no loathing. No avoiding eye-contact when you see them at the shops. You are to think of them like a sibling who you are still connected and committed to in Christ – despite the mess of the moment. And so, while Paul does say to pull back relationally, he doesn't call for the silent treatment. Believers are still to speak to them, but with a focus on "loving warning."

James likewise says in chapter 5:19-20:

*<sup>19</sup> My brothers and sisters, if any among you strays from the truth, and someone turns him back, <sup>20</sup> let that person know that whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.*

Paul's words shows us that when the church has to call out persistent sin (whether it be idleness or otherwise) we must do so in a just way, that protects the body and serves the good of the individual.

### **Link to Application**

Paul is telling us in this final chapter that we cannot treat idleness as an acceptable sin in our lives. We need this word, because I think we live in a culture marked by a background idleness.

Research conducted this year revealed the daily amount of media that the average Australian aged 16-64 consumes each day. The findings included three and half hours of TV, one and three quarter hours on social media and close to an hour on video games. The average adult Aussie likely has a part-time or full time job, but that doesn't mean we don't have a lot of idle time on our hands.

So what can we do to push back against our prevailing culture and live in obedience to God's word here. I want to suggest 5 brief points of application as we come to a close. Each of these points I'll pose as a question to ask yourself.

#### **1. Is my heart led by my hard-working Lord?**

Before Paul starts calling believers to work with the hands, he first tells them to think about their hearts. You see it there back in verse 5:

*<sup>5</sup> May the Lord direct your hearts to God's love and Christ's endurance.*

Paul knows that the work of our hands ultimately flows from the conviction of our hearts. We need to know God's immeasurable love for us. We need to ask God to help us see Christ's endurance and hard work on our behalf.

We need to remember that Christ Himself worked faithfully with *his* hands, toiling in his carpentry. We need to see the way he was faithful to the greater job He had been given by the Father – to die for our sins.

At no point did not slack off in this work. When tempted by Satan to take the easy road, he rejected it, and kept going. When the crowds who had praised him started turning against Him, he didn't quit, but kept working hard for us. When he prayed to His Father in the garden of Gethsemene, asking whether it was possible to avoid the cross, he submitted himself to His Father's will, and did what he did not want to do. Jesus worked hard and you reap the benefits of forgiveness and eternal life – through faith in Him.

What will lead you to work hard in service of Christ (applying for work, doing the dishes, mowing the lawns)? It's knowing that Christ first worked hard in service to us.

Is my heart led by my hard-working Lord?

#### **2. Am I getting the diagnosis correct?**

When it comes to a discussion about idleness it's important not to misdiagnose the problem. Some things in the Christian life that we perceive as spiritual problems are, in fact, physical problems."

And that may be the case for some of you. You might be thinking you lack productivity in life, that "get up and go" to get jobs done around the home or take on more work. This may not necessarily be due to the fact you are lazy. It may

be that you have a thyroid problem, or that you're not eating right, or that you're simply sleep deprived. John Piper speaks of a time in his ministry marked by weariness. It turns out he had a super underactive thyroid. No amount of reading my bible more was going to solve that issue, he says. I just need medication. Remember, Paul does say the "one who is unable to work, but unwilling to work (v.10). Sometimes we need to do a bit more reflection and investigation to figure out which camp we're in.

Lack of productivity is not always an idleness problem. But, sometimes it is, so let's consider the third question.

### **3. Do I have the right understanding of work?**

One of the missteps we can make with this passage is to think if we have a paid job, we're all good. This passage doesn't apply to us. Now, at one level, paid work is good and it is something that Paul addresses here. But he does more than just advocate for people to provide for themselves. He sets forth a *lifestyle* of fruitful productivity that I think extends beyond paid employment.

There's a classic moment in the Simpsons, when Homer is reminiscing about his life as a Parent of small children. Homer, who had a full-time job at the time says of this time:

*"It's not easy to juggle a pregnant wife and a troubled child, but somehow I managed to fit in 8 hours of TV a day."*

It's possible have a paid job and still struggle with an idle lifestyle – one in that neglects the fruitful productivity that *other* important areas of life call for – such as contributing to the well-being of your household. We need a bigger concept of work, if we are going to rightly apply this passage. Work takes place in our service at church, involvement in our community, and through our chores at home.

Paul certainly understood the household to be a context for work. That's why he exhorts the younger women of his day to be diligent in "*working* at home" (Titus 2:5).

Paul laboured so that he would not be a burden to the Thessalonians. Where, outside your paid job, might your idle behaviour be placing a burden on others? Are you refusing to do the dishes and so leaving that burden to your housemates or spouse? Are you waiting for someone else to mow the lawns? I remember the days of share housing when the pile of recycling in wedged between the fridge and the wall was so high it was literally almost as tall as I was. Every time we carefully balanced yet another milk carton, or another tin on the top of the pile, we were choosing sinful laziness over God-honouring work.

Paul's words here set forth a work *ethic* that extends beyond a paid job, into the labours of our homes, our church, our community.

### **4. Am I allowing the perfect to be the enemy of the good?**

Is your pursuit of the perfect (or even pretty good) job preventing you from working any job? There may be a time in your life, where sometimes the right choice is just to *get* a job rather than wait for the perfect one to come your way. We know of a man, who had completed a science doctorate at University but struggled to land a job in his field. Now, he could have chosen to keep waiting around for the perfect job – it would be easy to feel you were entitled to it. But this guy, instead chose to get a job stacking working at a local coles stacking shelves while he waited. He didn't see it as beneath him, but beneficial to him. That is the kind of attitude that obeys the call to "work quietly and provide for oneself." Jesus wants to see in that in His people.

### **5. Am I asking God to change me?**

Finally, "am I asking God to change me." What book ends Paul's words on idleness is his confident hope in God to help the Thessalonians to live his way. "The Lord is faithful" (v.3). "We have confidence in the Lord" (v.4). The grace of Jesus Christ be with you (v.18).

God is not only helping us see the issue of idleness in our lives, he's telling us to ask Him to help us change. So, if you think you need help in this area, talk to God about that. Repent of where you have been idle. Thank Him that Christ has atoned for this sin also. Ask him to make you more like your saviour in this area. Ask him to help you see

the ways in which you, in your circumstances can give yourself to faithful labour that glorifies God, loves your neighbour and witness to the world around you.”

<sup>18</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Amen.