

God Made Us to Work (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15)

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If I asked you, is it possible to separate religion and politics, what would you say? Yes? No? Would you say probably not, but we should try as best we can? The Bible makes a clear distinction between the institution of the state and her responsibilities and the institution of the church and her responsibilities. At the same time, Scripture repeatedly insist it is impossible to separate religion from politics. Why? Because every human being on the planet is a worshiper.

By worshiper, I obviously don't mean every human being is a member of an *organized* religion. I simply mean every human being is religious in the sense that they ascribe value to someone or something as the ultimate measure of what is true, good, and therefore worthy of allegiance. A crass materialist has a functional god. They believe the pleasures and possessions of this world define what is true, good, and worthy of allegiance. A strident atheist has a functional god. They believe the conviction that there is no god defines what is true, good, and worthy of allegiance.

As Christians, what do we believe? We believe the eternal, self-sufficient, and infinitely glorious God who created this world and everything in it is the ultimate measure, the final definition, of what is true, good, and worthy of our allegiance. And it is precisely that religious conviction that makes the church inescapably political.

By political, I don't mean the church has some kind of biblical mandate to endorse a particular candidate running for office. In most cases, I think that's pastorally unwise for a variety of reasons. But the church is deeply political in the sense that our religious belief entails a particular vision for human flourishing, for the kind of community, the kind of body politic, in which men and women will thrive.

Jeremiah 31:31-34, "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."



Friends, the church is a political body because the church is where God gives the world a glimpse of a new kind of community. It's called the goodness and beauty of life in his kingdom. Our ruler is King Jesus. Our governing law is his law. And the foundation of our relationship with one another is his gift of forgiveness from all our sins! As Jonathan Leeman argues in his book, *How the Nations Rage*, "For a Christian, the political life must begin inside the church – in our new-creation life together as local congregations."

Life in the church is life the way God designed it to be – a true, albeit imperfect, taste of heaven on earth. So it comes as no surprise that God's Word is full of political claims – this is how the community of God's people should relate to one another and this is how they should NOT relate to one another. 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 is exactly one of those places.

In these verses, the Apostle Paul lays out a political vision for the church. It's not a Democratic vision or a Republican vision. It's Jesus authoritative vision for his redeemed people. So what is Jesus political platform for the church when it comes to the whole issue of work? That's our topic this morning.

THE PEOPLE OF GOD SHOULD BE CHARACTERIZED BY PROVIDING FOR THEMSELVES AND OTHERS THROUGH HARD WORK.

Paul establishes the biblical PRINCIPLE in verses 7-10, identifies a corresponding PROBLEM in the church in verses 11-12, and instructs the congregation at large how to RESPOND in verse 6 and verses 13-15. We're going to work from the middle of the passage out so we can begin with the principle, move to the problem, and end with our response.

1) THE PRINCIPLE: GOD CREATED US TO LIVE THROUGH WORK

Look at verses 7-8. Paul says, "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."

Notice how Paul assumes the right way of living is as much caught as taught. The face to face instruction he gave the Thessalonians in godliness didn't start with public instruction. It started with his personal example. Brothers and sisters, every one of you is a teacher, in the sense that the example of your life, what other

people see when they observe you, exerts a powerful influence on their life. Parents, beware. Friends, be careful.

So what did Paul teach the Thessalonians through his example? What did he want them to imitate as a result of watching his life? Verse 8, "With toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you." To put it negatively, verse 7, "We were not idle."

Our culture sends mixed messages when it comes to work. On the one hand, we dislike work and want to be done with it as soon as possible. Thank God it's Friday, right? Financial planning magazines are filled with tips for maximizing your earnings and retiring early so you can enjoy at least a few years of "the good life" before you die. On the other hand, we idolize our work, looking to a job to satisfy our hunger for meaning and fulfillment. Discover the color of your parachute and don't stop searching for jobs or switching jobs until you find the perfect fit.

Consider how many men and women spend their entire life sacrificing their physical and emotional health – not to mention their families – trying to climb the corporate ladder to prove their worth and value to themselves and others through their work. We think of productivity as the ultimate measure of what is true, good, and right. Our culture disdains work. Our culture idolizes work. Christianity says something completely different.

A) God created us to work

After creating the first man and woman, what did the Lord say to them? Genesis 1:28, "And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" The same divine design resurfaces in Genesis 2:15, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it."

Those commands do not apply just to farmers and fishermen. They apply to every man and women who has ever lived. Work is not a necessary evil. Work is exceedingly good. When you work, whether as a roofer, a teacher, a caretaker, an artist, a programmer, a project manager, or any other activity that enhances human flourishing, you are doing what God created us to do.

And remember, work includes all kinds of unpaid activities. When you're studying hard in school to prepare for the future, you're working. When you're serving your parents by joyfully doing chores around the house, you're working. When you're preparing a meal for a friend or serving on a ministry team at church, you're working. When you stay at home to raise three children under the age of 5, you're working. In all of those ways and thousands more, God created you to work, to take the substance of the created world and provide for yourself and others through your work.

Why did God do that? Why did he create us to work and in so doing to provide for ourselves and others? Because work is one of the ways we image him as our Creator. As the one who created all things and upholds all things, God works and provides for us through his work.

Psalm 104:14-15, "You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart."

I love those verses because they show us how God's work and our work go hand in hand. What does God do? He causes the plants to grow. What do we do? We cultivate them to provide material necessities and pleasures – bread and wine – not just for ourselves, but also for others, especially our family and dependents. 1 Timothy 5:8, "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." The Bible teaches us, first and foremost, that work is a good thing.

B) Work is hard and painful because of sin

When Adam and Eve rebelled against God's authority, it wasn't just their relationship with God that suffered. Their relationship with work did too. Genesis 3:17-19, "Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground..."

The suffering we experience in work is a gracious gift from God. It helps us remember this world isn't the way God created it to be. God didn't create poverty. God didn't create disability. God didn't create famines. God didn't create economic downturns and unemployment. So what went wrong? We sinned. We're living

under the curse. And we desperately need a Savior. We desperately need Jesus to make right all that sin has made wrong, starting with our relationship to God and extending to our work.

C) Jesus will redeem our work by redeeming the entire created order

When Jesus comes back, he will remove every last vestige of the curse of sin he already defeated through his death and resurrection. And when he appears, friends, work will not disappear. It will be redeemed. Speaking of the heavenly city, life in the new creation, Revelation 21:24-26 declares, "The kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations." The productive output of every tribe and tongue (the fruit of our work) will be completely and perfectly devoted to the glory of God and the good of his people.

So what should we do in the meantime while work is both good and hard? Colossians 3:23–24, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ."

That's an incredible promise! When you work "heartily," when you work diligently, when you work in a way that honors God, you are not just serving your clients, patients, or customers. You are serving Jesus. You are glorifying Jesus. And one day you will be rewarded by Jesus. Why? Because we please God when we do what he created us to do, regardless of how many people see our work, recognize our work, or appreciate our work. Parents, take heart!

God created us to live through work by providing for ourselves and others through our work. It's one of the primary ways we worship and honor him with our lives. And that, friends, is why Paul refused to be idle. He refused to sponge off the Thessalonians' generosity. He had a right to depend on their financial support as a minister of the gospel, but chose not to. He worked for his own bread – night and day – instead of eating their bread? Why? Because he wanted (verse 9) to give them "an example to imitate."

That's the principle. It's not Paul's idea. It's God's design. If work is available and you are able to work, you should provide for yourself through your work and not depend unnecessarily on other people to provide for you. The principle is straightforward enough. But there was a problem in Thessalonica.

2) THE PROBLEM: PROVIDING FOR THOSE WHO ARE UNWILLING TO WORK ENABLES DISOBEDIENCE

Apparently, there were not just professing Christians, but actual members of the church, “brothers,” as Paul describes them in verse 6, who were “walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.” What’s the tradition they received? God’s design for work, which Paul modeled and explained in verses 7-9.

“The tradition” is the same phrase Paul used back in Chapter 2 to describe the truth of the gospel, the good news of salvation from sin and death through faith in Christ. What does that tell us? That God’s design for work isn’t just a function of creation. It’s an implication of the gospel.

When Jesus died, he purchased men and women for God. If you’re a Christian, if you’re trusting Jesus as your Savior, you are not your own. Your body is not your own. Your time is not your own. Your gifts and abilities are not your own. You are Christ’s. He owns you because he paid for you. That’s a clear implication of the gospel.

Therefore, Jesus has an absolute right to tell you how to live, which means it’s not okay to say to Jesus, “I know you made me to work, but I’m not really into that. I would rather other people work and let me get in on the benefits. I mean, it’s not like I’m just lying in bed all day. I’m plenty busy with all sort of things, so busy, in fact, that I really don’t have time for work.”

Verse 11, “For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.” Your meddling in a little bit of this, a little bit of that, looking “busy,” feeling “busy,” involved in all kinds of other people’s affairs, but you’re not actually doing what God wants you to do – provide for yourself and others through work. Remember, idleness, from God’s perspective, isn’t the absence of activity, it’s the absence of the kind of activity God has called us to do.

So what were these “idle” people doing in Thessalonica? They were sponging off the generosity of their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. The church’s corporate practice of benevolence may have been a well-intended effort at being merciful, but it was actually enabling disobedience. Paul recognizes as much and tells them to stop helping their brothers and sisters in a way that ultimately hurts them. If you

really want to help them, put the power of hunger work! Verse 10, "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat."

Verse 11 is even more specific. "Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living." It's a two-fold word of correction: stop disturbing other people by eating their food. Instead, work to provide for yourself so you can eat your own bread.

Let me clarify something really important here. If you are physically unable to work or can't find work, you should not be ashamed or embarrassed. Remember, we don't merit God's favor or blessing through our work. We receive God's favor and blessing as a gift of faith through Jesus Christ. All of us are ultimately dependent on the Lord as our provider. You're also not the problem Paul is addressing in Thessalonica.

The folks he's correcting here were not unable to work. They were unwilling to work. There's a big difference. The problem in Thessalonica, and a problem the church still faces today, is how to respond to people who abuse the generosity of others. And here's where Paul's practical instructions at the beginning and end of this passage is incredibly helpful.

3) THE RESPONSE: IN YOUR PRACTICE OF GENEROSITY, REFUSE TO IGNORE THE SPIRITUAL DANGER OF LAZINESS

When you feel like people are abusing your generosity, what you we tempted to do? Stop giving altogether, right? We get taken advantage of one-too-many times and eventually decide, "You know what? I am sick and tired of this whole generosity thing. If you have needs, deal with it. You take care of you. I'll take care of me. I get there are people out there with real needs, but the risk of abuse is too great."

That may be how you're tempted to respond, friend. But that's not how the Lord tells us to respond. Look at verse 13, "As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good." What sort of "good" is Paul talking about? In context, it's the "good" of material assistance or financial support. He knew Thessalonians were tempted to quit giving to people in need altogether because of the way their generosity had been abused. So before he says anything else, he exhort them, he warns them, he commands them, "Listen, you guys, DON'T STOP BEING GENEROUS."



Why not? Because it's part of the cost of loving broken people in a broken world. Christian, have you ever presumed on the kindness of God? Have you ever abused the gift of his forgiveness by intentionally disobeying his commands? Even if it's wrong, I know Jesus will still forgive me. Have you ever taken the intellect God has given you, the financial resources he has entrusted to you, or the time he has graciously allotted you, and used it in a way that wasn't pleasing to him?

Let's be honest. There's not a Christian on the planet who hasn't taken advantage of the Lord. Yet he has not grown weary in doing good to us, brothers and sisters. May we follow his example in doing the same. Luke 6:35-36, "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

The command to not stop being generous reinforces one of the core purposes of work I alluded to earlier. God created us to work not just so we have something to eat, but so we have something to give. And please notice, friend, there is no "six-figures-and-higher-only" asterisk at the end of verse 13. Don't exempt yourself from "doing good," from being financially generous to those in need simply because you don't make as much as the person next to you or someone else in the church.

A few years ago, I received a card from a member of our church who I knew had very little to live on. If anyone shouldn't feel bad about having nothing to give it was them. Let me tell you. When I opened the card and saw what some might write off as a relatively small financial gift, I was undone. I thought to myself, "I don't deserve a single dollar of this gift." In that moment, what did I experience? A taste of the radically unselfish love of God through her generosity.

Don't count yourself out from being used by God to "do good" to others, even if you have very little to give, and even when it's possible your generosity could be abused. Be wise. Do your homework and take appropriate precautions, but don't ever let "avoiding potential abuse" drive the train. Allow the radical generosity of God toward us in Christ to drive the train and trust him with the ultimate outcome.

I'm grateful for your example in this regard, KingsWay. Year to date, you've given over \$11,000 to our Mercy Fund, which provides material support to families in need inside and outside our church. And that doesn't include the countless ways you have practically loved one another by making meals, donating food, providing volunteer babysitting, you name it.

Our first response to the possibility of someone abusing our generosity is to not stop being generous, remembering we're not ultimately serving or giving to men. We're serving and giving to the Lord, all we have is his to begin with, and nothing we ever do for him or give to him is ever in vain. However, what should we do if we know a particular person is clearly abusing the church's generosity? How should we respond if one of our own, a covenant member of the church, consistently refuses to work and provide for themselves?

Look back at verse 6. "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..." We find the same instruction in verse 14, "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."

Does that strike you as harsh? "Keep away?" "Have nothing to do with him?" Really? What happened to all the love and kindness in "do not grow weary in doing good?" Brothers and sisters, the Lord's admonition to us in verses 6 & 14 is a powerful expression of his love and kindness. It's the love and kindness of church discipline.

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

When a professing Christian refuses to live in keeping with their profession by obeying the clear command of God's Word, including commands like 2 Thessalonians 3:12, "Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living," what does love do? Love refuses to pretend everything's ok. Love refuses to turn a blind eye to their disobedience.

Love says, "Brother, sister, if you continue down a path of willful, unrepentant sin, you have no hope of salvation on the final day of judgment. And we love you so much, and we are so committed to the eternal good of your soul, that if you persists in refusing to live in keeping with your profession of faith, we will no longer be able to affirm your profession of faith and will be forced to remove you as a member of our church. We love too much to continue affirming the authenticity

of your profession of faith by keeping you as a member in good standing of the church when the unrepentant laziness in your life screams the opposite.

That's what Paul means by "keep away" or "have nothing to do with them." He's talking about the redemptive process of church discipline. There are times we must do that, friends. We do it to avoid promoting false assurance of salvation for the individual in question, sowing seeds of moral confusion in the minds and hearts of other members who may be wrestling with the same issue, and compromising the integrity of the church's witness to the righteous implications gospel in the eyes of the watching world.

What's the goal? The goal is for the unrepentant sinner to come to their spiritual senses, to feel the shame and guilt of their sin, not so they wallow in despair and come back to us begging for readmittance into the covenant community, but so they will turn from their sin for the evil it is, trust Christ as their Savior, and choose to live in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. The "win" we long for throughout the entire process of church discipline, including the final step of removal from membership, is always repentance.

There's nothing vindictive about the discipline Paul commends here. What does he say in verse 15? No matter what they've done or how far they go, never "regard him as an enemy." Instead, "warn him as a brother." Plead with him, urge him, in view of his professed identity as a fellow member of the body of Christ, to turn from his sin of laziness and work as God created him to work.

That kind of appeal, that kind of corporate accountability, is as precious means of spiritual grace to a wandering believer. Don't keep going down this path. Stop imperiling your soul. Turn back and follow Jesus. If you're not willing to do that for a fellow Christian, if we're not willing to do that for one another as a church family, we have yet to love one another as God commands us to love. In our persistent practice of generosity, we must refuse to ignore the spiritual danger of laziness.

CONCLUSION

The people of God should be characterized by providing for themselves and others through hard work. It's what God created us to do. It's what God saved us to do. It's one of the ways we model the incredible generosity he has shown us in Christ Jesus.



Jesus didn't come to earth to be served. He came to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Sponging off the church, abusing another Christian's generosity, does the exact opposite. It takes advantage of others, it steals from others, instead of serving others. As Paul reminded the church in Ephesus (Ephesians 4:28), "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need."

Make that your goal, friend. Instead of being a burden on other people, work to provide for yourself and them. And if you're already doing that, don't stop being generous just because people could take advantage of you. The Lord sees all things. The Lord knows all things. If a brother or sister in Christ persist in refusing to work, Jesus will use the redemptive discipline of the church to help them come to their spiritual senses. May the Lord give us diligence and courage to honor him in it all. Let's pray.