

2 Thessalonians 3 “The Danger of Idleness”
Deuteronomy 24:6-22
Psalm 86A

September 16, 2018

Deuteronomy 24 lays out some of the basic principles of economic justice.

Verses 19-22 talk about one of the ways that Israel should provide for the poor.

When you reap your harvest,
 when you beat your olive trees,
 when you gather the grapes –
 don't harvest *everything*.

Leave some in the field, on the trees, on the vines.

Why?

So that the poor can come and glean.

Notice that this is a system of poor relief
 that requires the poor to *work*.

A poor widow – like Ruth – could gather sufficient food,
 but only if she was willing to go out into the fields and work for it!

In our day, it's a bit more complicated!

If a poor person needs a car, he can't go to GM and assemble leftover parts!

But if you think about it, used cars *function* in much the same way.

If a poor person goes out and works for a few weeks, a few months,
 he can generally afford a used car.

But Israel frequently failed to put these principles into practice.

Our Psalm of response, Psalm 86A,
 reflects on the problems that occur *within the church* in this area.

When David speaks of the “insolent men” who rise up against him
 he is talking about his fellow Israelites!

The Man of Lawlessness – the mystery of lawlessness –
 arises from within the church.

And we often need God's grace and mercy to deal with *us*.

So let us sing

Sing Psalm 86A (all)

Read 2 Thessalonians 3

Some people say that if God is sovereign – if he has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass –
 then why pray? Why evangelize?

 Just sit back and let God do his thing!!

Paul has absolutely *no sympathy* with that way of thinking.

For Paul, if God is sovereign – if God is the one who governs and directs all things – then *prayer* is absolutely essential!

(After all, God is the *one person* who can *really* do something!)

And if God has ordained that the preaching of the gospel *will accomplish* his purposes – then *evangelism* is absolutely essential!

And in fact, Paul brings all these things together in our passage today – urging us to pray for him – and for all those who preach the gospel – so that the Word of the Lord may speed ahead and accomplish its work.

Because what God does in preaching is to change hearts.

As our Shorter Catechism puts it:

The Spirit of God makes the reading – but especially the preaching – of the Word an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.

1. Pray for Us: That the Word of the Lord May Speed Ahead (v1-5)

Finally, brothers,^[a] pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored,^[b] as happened among you, ² and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith.

And so Paul urges the Thessalonians “pray for us” – and what is the *one thing* that Paul wants the Thessalonians to pray for him?

That the word of the Lord may speed ahead.

Paul often uses this verb to refer to the christian life.

When he talks about “running the race” (in Rom 9, 1 Cor 9, Gal 2, Gal 5, Phil 2) he uses this verb.

But here he talks about the *word of the Lord* running!

“The gospel itself [is] running for the prize, namely, victory over people’s hearts and over false religions and philosophies that have competed with the gospel...

God will demonstrate at the end of time that the gospel of Christ is the true ‘winner’ against all competing worldviews.” (Beale, 237)

Yes, Paul’s apostolic ministry is a sort of running the race.

Our Christian life is a sort of running as well.

But that is because the word of the Lord is running before us!

The gospel – the good news of Jesus – continues to go forth (whoever is preaching!).

And so now, long after Paul has died,
we should continue to pray that the word of the Lord would speed ahead!
- that the Word of the Lord would continue to accomplish
the purpose for which God has sent it!

And there are two parts to the prayer for the Word of the Lord to speed ahead:

First, that it would be honored – as happened among you.
The word of the Lord is honored – it is glorified –
when people believe the gospel!
When you believe the Word, you are honoring the Word –
because faith (as we see in v4) goes on to *do* the things that the Word says!

But there is a problem!
Not all have faith.

And so Paul asks for a second part to the prayer for speeding ahead of the Word:
that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men –
since not all have faith.

Paul said in chapter 1 that the Lord Jesus would bring vengeance
on those who do not know God
and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus;
Now he adds that he himself has the same confidence
that God will deliver him from wicked and evil men.

Now, remember what we saw in chapter 2:
Paul's language of the "man of lawlessness"
strongly suggested that the key opposition to the gospel
would arise *from within the church*.
His language here continues in that vein:
the word translated "wicked" means "out of place" –
and Jesus told us that the tares do grow up among the wheat.

And throughout all of church history there have been those in the church
who are "out of place."
Those who have used the church for personal gain
(the NT tells us that this was true even in the days of the apostles!).

Here Paul reminds us that "not all have faith."
Joel reminded us of this the other night in the parable of the seed and the soils:
There are those who receive the word with joy –
but when trouble comes, they fall away –
because they have no root.
Not all have faith!

This is potentially a very scary warning!

Do I have faith?

It's a good and proper question to ask!

Even the Disciples asked it.

When Jesus told them that one of them would betray him,
they asked him, one after another, "Is it I, Lord?"

I take great comfort in that!

It wasn't just *Judas* who asked, Is it I?

There were many others of the twelve
who knew their own hearts well enough to wonder,
Would I betray my Lord?

But Paul also understood how to comfort those who were *weak* in faith:

³ *But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.* ^[c]

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall lack for nothing!

Yea though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death

I will fear no evil – for you are with me!

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me!

Not all have faith –

But the Lord is faithful!

And our confidence is *not* in ourselves!

Our confidence is *not* in each other!

Our confidence is in the Lord *about you!*

⁴ *And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.*

This is a beautiful way to say it:

we have confidence in the Lord about you!

Our confidence is not in *you*.

It is *not* that you are such wonderful people

that you will continue to do everything right!!

If *that* was Paul's confidence,

then well, we wouldn't be here!

Because the church has *not* done well at doing the things that Paul commands!

My high school class is reading Gregory of Tours *History of the Franks* –

about the church in France in the fifth and sixth century.

There are moments when you wonder –

how did the church ever survive?!

I remember well my first Sunday at MCPC –
I think it was 17 years ago next week! –
when a man walked up to me and said,
“South Bend needs a PCA church.
But this isn’t it!”
I never saw him again!

But quite frankly, *he was right*.
We are *not* the PCA church that South Bend needs.
We are simply the PCA church that God has put here.

Our confidence is in the LORD –
but notice what that confidence results in:
“that you are doing and will do the things that we command”!

If our confidence was in *you* – that *you* are going to do all that Paul says –
that would be a grievous burden!
But our confidence is in the Lord *about you* –
because we *know* that he who began a good work in you
will bring it to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ!

And again – that’s why *prayer* is so important!
Because *God* is the one who changes hearts!
And remember – that is what Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians was all about:
[read chapter 2:13-17]

And Paul returns to this theme in verse 5.

Verse 5 is the key to the whole passage.
I appreciate the ESV translation because it captures well the ambiguity in the Greek!

⁵ *May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.*

Both in Greek and in English the “love of God”
could refer to God’s love for us – *or* for our love of God.
Likewise, the “steadfastness of Christ”
could refer to Christ’s own steadfastness, or to our steadfastness in Christ.

Sometimes it actually matters which way you interpret it –
but often I suspect that Paul is using the ambiguity of language intentionally.
If you said to Paul, “Which one did you mean?
Do you want the Lord Jesus to direct our hearts to God’s love for us –
or our love for God?”
I suspect that Paul would look at you kinda funny

and say, why would you divide those?!

Our love for God is rooted in his love for us.
Our steadfastness in Christ is grounded in his steadfast love and faithfulness.

Paul's confidence is in the Lord –
and the LORD is the one who will direct your hearts to the love of God
and to the steadfastness of Christ –
so that you might patiently endure faithful to the end
as you hope for his blessed coming at the final day!

In other words,
as Paul urges you to pray for the speeding ahead of the gospel –
that the gospel might run its race to the end –
for the salvation of the world! –
Paul also prays for *you* –
that the Lord would straighten your path –
that the Lord would focus your attention on these two things:
the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ.

Because that's what you are supposed to be about!
Love God.
Be steadfast.
Persevere in faith, hope, and love – in the way of our Lord Jesus Christ!

If you understand that – then you will be ready to understand Paul's warning that follows.

2. A Warning against Idleness (v6-15)

a. “Keep Away” from the Idle Brother (v6)

⁶Now 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.

How often do you think of your daily labor as a vital part of your Christian life?
Whatever your daily labor is
(whether as an engineer, a student, a housewife, a secretary – or whatever) –
your daily labor is an essential part of your Christian life.

It goes all the way back to creation.
God called Adam to work the ground.
To labor – to work *hard*.
And you find it clearly stated in the 4th commandment.
The Fourth Commandments says “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.
Six days shall you labor and do all your work...”

If you think about it, the command to *rest* on the Sabbath day

only makes sense if you are working on the other six days!

And here in verses 6 and following,

Paul applies this in the context of what it looks like for our hearts
to be directed to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ.
Because if we love God, then we will be diligent in our work.
And if we are oriented toward the steadfastness of Christ –
if our hearts are directed in that patient endurance –
with our *hope* set upon *Christ* –
then we cannot walk in idleness.

Now, before we try to unpack this,
we need to understand *what is “idleness”*?

When you hear “idleness” you probably think in terms of *laziness*.
But that’s not the focus here.

The Greek word *ataktws* (used in verses 6 and 11) generally means “disorderly” –
and the verb *ataktew* (used in verse 7) means to be disorderly –
or to be neglectful of duty.

It was commonly used of soldiers when they marched out of order – or went AWOL.
(absent without leave).

“Therefore, the translation ‘idle’ covers only half of their offence.
They are not being good soldiers of Christ...
In the context of work this word refers to a failure to fulfill one’s duties
and work obligations.” (Witherington, 251)

Paul is not saying simply “don’t be a lazy bum”!
Certainly being a lazy bum would be included
as an example of walking in a disorderly manner!
But the idea of “idleness” – walking in a disorderly manner –
would apply to *anyone* who is neglecting their duty –
anyone who is AWOL – absent without leave –
who is failing in their ordinary obligations of life.

So a person who has a 9-5 job,
but ignores his responsibilities to his wife and children –
would still be walking in a disorderly manner.
And likewise, there are people who are incapable of working an ordinary job.
The disabled may be somewhat idle –
but that does not mean that they are disorderly!

So I’m rather disappointed in the choice of the word “idleness” here.
But, of course, you can see the reason why the ESV chose that word!
After all, Paul’s explanation of his own example in verses 7-9

focuses precisely on the importance of *work*.

b. Tradition and Imitation: The Path of Discipleship (v7-9)

⁷ *For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle [we were not disorderly] when we were with you, [and how did we express our “orderliness”?] ⁸ 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. ⁹ It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.*

Paul himself provides an example of what this looks like.

Paul was called to preach the gospel of Jesus to the nations.
If anyone had a right to be supported by others,
it would have been Paul!

Elsewhere (in 1 Corinthians 9) Paul provides a clear command
that pastors should be paid for their labors.

But Paul chose not to avail himself of that right –
because he wanted to give the Thessalonians an example of hard work to imitate.

Paul took the fourth commandments seriously:

Six days shall you labor and do all your work!
And he gave the church an example to imitate.

What does it mean for *you* to be busy about the work that God has given you to do?

Well, the first thing that it must mean is that you are called to provide for your household.
And this starts when you are young!

Children, did you know that what you are doing *right now* is part of your toil and labor
that will provide for your own household someday?!!

Do you want to get married someday?

Do you want to have a family of your own?

Well, then you are going to need to have some way of providing for them!

You'll need to do some sort of work that other people are willing to pay you for.

That's what you are doing right now in school.

You are developing the sorts of skills and abilities that you will need later in life.

You may not know *now* what you will need *then* –

but by developing a range of skills and abilities now,

you will be better prepared later to put those skills and abilities to use

in loving God and neighbor in your daily toil.

Nowadays there is a tendency to encourage young people to study what you love –
to follow your heart –

and the result is often that young people wind up thinking
that there should be a job for them that they love!

And so if I don't love it, I should find something else.

But that's not the way that Paul speaks here in 2 Thessalonians 3.

Paul's exhortation to you is to do your work quietly and earn your own living
(literally, "eat your own bread.")

Paul is encouraging you to do the work that is before you.

If you can find better work – that's fine!

But the *work* that puts bread on the table
is *not* where you find your identity and meaning in life!

Do you want to know what really showed me the *problem*
with our obsession with "meaningful work"?

When I first started hanging out with Monte and Mihkail, over on the west side,
I would meet their friends – the young guys who they mentored –
and I would ask all the standard 'getting to know you' questions!

What's your name?

Where are you from?

What do you do?

And that last one generally killed the conversation.

For most of them,

what they *did* for a living was almost entirely irrelevant to who they were.

And it slowly began to dawn on me that our middle-class culture

has turned "what I do" into "who I am" –

and so it is *no wonder* that we are preoccupied with finding a job that we *love*.

And this is why verse 5 is the key to the whole chapter:

"May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ."

The love of God and the steadfastness of Christ

is what our hearts should be oriented towards.

So *whatever* we do in our daily labor should be oriented toward the love of God
and the steadfastness of Christ.

You might be tempted to say,

"Oh that's all well for you to say, pastor,
you *love* what you do!"

Don't be so sure of that!

Haven't you noticed?

If I could do what I love – what would I do?

I would sit in my study and work on the Breckinridge biography all day!!!

But that is *not* what Christ has called me to do!

(I'm grateful that you all seem to think that I should spend *some* time on that –
and I do hope that my labors there will be useful to Christ's kingdom!)

But my *duty* is to preach Christ.

Indeed, as Paul says, “I am under compulsion.
Woe to me if I do not preach Christ!”

Duty is not a bad thing!

It is my duty to love my wife.

(Whether I feel like it or not!)

If my love for my wife is based on my feelings – on my desires –
well, I may not *want* to love her today!

But if I act on duty –

if I develop the *habit* – the practice – the tradition –
of doing those things that God calls me to do –
then it will become part of me –
and I just might enjoy it along the way!

Paul even places his gratitude to God in 2:13 on the foundation of *duty* –
“we *ought* always to give thanks to God for you” (cf. 1:3).

If it’s the right thing to do, then you should do it –
regardless of your feelings!

And if you make it your habit – if you make it your regular practice –
you just might find that your feelings catch up!

I dare say that all those who make it their habit to do their daily work as unto the Lord
find a certain measure of enjoyment – or at least satisfaction – in their daily work.

And this gets at the proper way to go about figuring out what you should be doing!
Rather than ask, “What do I love to do?” (which is a rather selfish question!),
I would suggest that you ask,
“How can I love and serve others in this community – in this region?”
Look around you for something that needs to be done.
Look around you for some way that you can use your time and energy
to love God, and love neighbor.

Probably it will start pretty small.

That grocery store needs someone to work in the deli.

I can do that!

But then you realize – hey, I could be useful to my community as a hair stylist –
or I could love and serve others by being a plumber.

But if your heart is directed toward the Love of God and the Steadfastness of Christ –
then just keep doing what God puts in front of you to do!

And that’s where Paul zeros in on the command in verses 10-12:

c. The Command: Be Busy Workers, Not Busybodies (v10-12)

¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. ¹¹ For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.

Apparently there were some people who were taking advantage of the church's diaconal ministry. Some think that this had to do with those who thought that Christ had already returned – but Paul doesn't make that connection explicit – so we certainly shouldn't limit his warning to that! Paul's warning applies to all Christians! If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

And then notice what they do.

“we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work but busybodies.”

This is a play on words.

They are not busy loving and serving God and neighbor.

They are busy with their disorderly conduct.

They are busybodies – using all their free time to make trouble for others.

Think back to what Paul had said about the “out of place” and evil men in verse 2.

The disorderly are “out of place” because they do not follow the divine order of creation “in which all humans are to work in order to sustain one's existence” (Beale, 253)

And this has an adverse effect on the spread of the gospel – because where the gospel takes root and flourishes, human beings flourish!

Many historians have noted that there was a strong emphasis on hard work that grew out of the Reformation.

Much of the prosperity of Protestant countries can be attributed to that work ethic.

And you see the rationale for that in verse 12:

¹² Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

“...we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ...”

This is the same principle that Paul articulates in Colossians 3, when he urges slaves,

“Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

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.” (3:22-24)

When you serve the Lord Christ in your daily labors,

you work hard – you work diligently –
not just when others are watching,
but because you love Him!

And so admonishes the idler –
the disorderly –
do your work quietly and eat your own bread.

And then he turns to the rest of the congregation –
those who are trying to put this into practice,
and he says (v13):

d. How to Shame the Idler (v13-15)

¹³ *As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.*

Keep on going.
May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

And (verse 14)

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.*

There's a tendency today to say that "shaming someone" is bad.
Certainly I would agree that "shaming someone" for something they didn't do is bad.
Or shaming someone just to be mean and nasty is bad.

But Paul says that when a person has done something shameful,
then he *should* be ashamed.

If he has brought dishonor on the name of Christ through his disorderly conduct,
then he should be ashamed of himself!

Paul says that the one who does not obey his direction in this letter
should be shunned.

If someone persists in his disorderly conduct,
then the church should "take note of that person" –
(which seems to involve a public action of the church –
not just private or personal action).

This seems to fall short of excommunication – after all,
Paul says in verse 15:

¹⁵ *Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.*

In 1 Corinthians, Paul talks about handing the man over to Satan –

but here this seems to fall short of such a drastic step!

Excommunication is reserved for *serious* unrepentant sin.

Disorderly conduct is *bad* –

and if you persist in disorderly conduct,

you may wind up in serious unrepentant sin! –

but Paul urges the church *not* to regard him as an enemy,

but to warn him as a brother.

Brother, you are heading the wrong direction!

And until you repent and turn back in the right way,

our fellowship is going to be obstructed.

We need to take disorderly conduct seriously.

It will get in the way of the church's witness –

it will slow down and hinder the progress of the gospel.

But Paul does not leave us there.

He brings us back to Peace and Grace.

3. Closing Benediction: Peace and Grace (v16-18)

¹⁶ *Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.*

¹⁷ *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.* ¹⁸ *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.*

In his greeting, Paul had said,

“Grace to you and Peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”

Now in his conclusion he blesses us –

“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way.”

How does the Lord of peace do this?

By his *presence* with us.

The Lord be with you all.

This is what the promise of Immanuel – God with us – is all about!

We are able to not grow weary in doing good –

because God himself is with us.

It's not *our* strength and ability –

it is *God's* grace and peace that sustains and enables us to do *anything!*