

Idle Hands

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 and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.

⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you,

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.

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.

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

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

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.

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

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.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

The Devil's Workshop

WITH A VERY LOOSE TRANSLATION of **Proverbs 16:27** which says, “**A worthless man plots evil,**” *The Living Bible* reads, “**Idle hands are the devil's workshop.**” Obviously, this is not the origin of this phrase. Given our subject matter at the end of Thessalonians, I was curious about its origin.

Many attribute it to the Puritans. There are sayings like it among them. **Isaac Watts** (1674-1748) for example (Song XX, “Against Idleness and Mischief”):

In works of labor, or of skill,
I would be busy too;
For Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do

Thomas Watson (1620-86) wrote: “**Idle persons. He who is idle, the devil will find him work to do.**”¹

¹ **Thomas Watson**, *The Select Works of the Rev. Thomas Watson, Comprising His Celebrated Body of Divinity, in a Series of Lectures on the Shorter Catechism, and Various Sermons and Treatises* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855), 560.

However, at least in the English tongue, the first to have written about it seems to have been the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages, **Geoffrey Chaucer** (1343-1400). In his *Tale of Melibee* he writes,

And, sir, get riches by your intellect and by your effort to your advantage, but without doing wrong or harm to any other person. For the law says that “there makes no man himself rich, if he does harm to another person.” This is to say, that nature prohibits and forbids justly that any man make himself rich unto the harm of another person ... Cicero says ... “And though the great men and the mighty men get riches more easily than you, yet you shall not be idle nor slow to do your benefit, for you shall in all ways flee idleness.” For Solomon says that “idleness teaches a man to do many evils.” And the same Solomon says that “he that works and busies himself to till his land shall eat bread, but he that is idle and devotes himself to no business nor occupation shall fall into poverty and die for hunger.” And he that is idle and slow can never find suitable time to earn his profit. For there is a lyricist who says that “the idle man excuses himself in winter because of the great cold, and in summer by reason of the great heat.” ... And therefore says Saint Jerome says, “Do some good deeds that the devil, who is our enemy, not find you unoccupied.” For the devil takes not easily unto his

power such as he finds occupied in good works. Then thus in getting riches you must flee idleness.²

The poet is telling you something. Men of all ages have understood **the dangers of idle hands**. And Christians of all ages have known that when we have nothing to do, this becomes one of the greatest areas of temptation from the devil. As we saw last week from Richard Baxter, it is temptation that attacks both our hands (the things we do in sin) and our health.

Innocent Adam was put into the garden of Eden to work it: and fallen man must “eat his bread in the sweat of his brow” (**Gen 3:19**): and he that “will not work must be forbidden to eat” (**1Th 3:10**). And indeed, it is necessary, for the health of our bodies, which grow diseased with idleness; and for the help of our souls, which will fail if the body fails. Fleshy man must have work for his body as well as for his soul. And the

² Chaucer, *Tale of Melibee*, A modern English Translation (lines 1581-97). <https://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/teachslf/mel-tran.htm>.

man who will do nothing but pray and meditate, will be disabled (by sickness or melancholy) before long either to pray or meditate, unless he has a strong body.³

Finishing A Letter

Today we are finishing the letter of 2 Thessalonians. Much of our passage overlaps with last week, for we did not have enough time to look at everything in this passage as well as we should. Last time I **contrasted** the very wrong interpretation of **2 Thess 3:10** by the communists Lenin and Stalin with the original meaning of Paul. Let me refresh your memory on what Paul had in mind. That verse says, “**For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.**”

There are **several keys** to understanding the original meaning. The first is the word “**command.**” It has a complement in **vs. 6**, “**tradition.**” This command is part of an established tradition that comes from somewhere. The second is Paul’s “**example,**” specifically the language that he uses. He says that we did not “**eat anyone’s bread**” and “**with toil a**

³ **Richard Baxter** and William Orme, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, vol. 2 (London: James Duncan, 1830), 334. I’ve smoothed over the older English.

labor we worked” (8). “Bread,” “toil” and “labor” take us back to that same passage quoted by Baxter: **Genesis 3:19**. This is where the tradition comes from. Third, he says that they were “not busy at work, but busybodies” (**2Th 3:11**). Being a “busybody” in other passages of Paul’s letters refers to spreading false doctrine. Fourth, is the context. This teaches what the **false doctrine** was. It concerns the “**day of the LORD**” having already come (**2Th 2:2**).

When you pull this all together, you end up with a group of Christians that were entertaining an early form of **Full Preterism**, that the Second Coming had occurred, and that the expectations of never having to work again because you would have all the food in the world were coming true. The curse has been reversed! In fact, nothing was farther from the truth, and the problems it was causing were of no end of concern to the Apostle.

It is at this point that I contrasted the use of **3:10** with that of **Stalin and Lenin**. They employed the verse as a **scare tactic** towards anyone who would not fall in line with the new communist program. Of course, this went along with other tactics such as sending people off to camps or shooting them in the head. The ironic thing is, the communists were

also teaching a kind of Preterism, for this is what communism promises: heaven on earth, the end of all suffering, the lack of all need. It's just that this Preterism is wholly void of God. This utopia comes totally by the hands of men. Therein lies the irony, for these men used bully tactics to bring it to pass, and yet like the Second Coming itself, their utopia was delayed, thus forcing them to use verses like this for "motivation."

It is difficult to imagine a more abusive way of treating our passage, and I wanted to contrast that for you, to help you see how important it is to [take the Bible's teachings](#) and see their actual meaning [before you go applying them](#) any old way. But just because the communists abused this text, does this mean that the only modern-day application of this command and tradition would be if someone came here and told us that Jesus had come back and therefore, we should stop working? That is highly unlikely to happen. Therefore, what I want to do today is look at the legitimacy of taking this passage as applying in ways that go beyond that original context.

Work and Idleness

Let's start with the more familiar applications, which are directly pointed at **work vs. idleness**. It seems to me that **work is the specific situation** that applies from **a larger principle**. The principle is that the earth is cursed and will be until Jesus returns. The command then is that if you won't work, you won't eat. There are several things we could say here.

First, this maxim or proverb implies something. It **implies that a person can work**. For example, it isn't talking about orphans or widows or people like that. Instead, the church is commanded to take care of them. **Calvin** said, "Take St. Paul's saying that 'whoever does not work, let him not eat' [2 Thess. 3:10]. If someone wanted to infer from this that little children ought not to be fed would he not deserve to be mocked by all the world? Why? Because he takes what is said about one party and applies it generally to all."⁴ And so **Thomas Boston** rightly says, "**By the idleness and sloth of those that are not able otherwise to maintain them-**

⁴ **John Calvin**, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition*, trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 542.

selves. Every one is bound by this command to have a calling, and be diligent in it, if they be able.”⁵ And so, the command is not talking about people who are tiny, physical handicapped, who lost all their limbs in a war, who have mental disorders such that it makes it impossible to carry out normal work, and so on.

On the other hand, we have two huge problems on the opposite end of this spectrum. We live in a society where a certain segment actually encourages people not to work, just so they can be controlled. Go on food stamps and the government gets to know everything about you. Get yourself on welfare from one political party and they can be nearly assured that that party is going to get your vote. Keep them from not working, and you get to control nearly everything about them, from the kind of food they can eat, to the places they are allowed to live, to the news that will watch.

The second part of this is that such political views actually play into our slothful default as human beings. Amazingly, sloth was considered one of the seven deadly sins. These seem to have originated with a fourth-century desert father called Evagrius Ponticus (345-99) who listed gluttony

⁵ Thomas Boston, *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston: An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion, Part 2*, ed. Samuel M'Millan, vol. 2 (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1848), 296.

as the last one! The word he gave it was *akedia*, and it can be rendered as being [apathetic](#), where the person is marked by depression, is full of melancholy, and does not enjoy the goodness of God. This in turn causes a person not to desire *anything*, including work.

I wonder long and hard if this particular vice isn't at the root of a good many problems facing us as a society and in the church. A civilization of unprecedented prosperity leads to a people who don't really need anything and therefore don't need to do anything, at least anything not productive. With nothing good to do, the desire to do nothing increases, and with it the tendency to become a busybody. And have we not become a people so apathetic that we spend our time watching news and listening to winds of doctrines that we begin to then spread them ourselves, opinions and ideas that threaten to tear apart the very nature of the church and the fabric of a Republic?

With both of these groups (those who impose or con or cajole idleness and those who willingly embrace it), I dare say that our first proverb certainly applies. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." In this case, the devil is using many today to wreak havoc in a culture that used to work hard, be

productive, and therefore not have time for trivial or leisurely pursuits.

This reminds me of the **Margaret Thatcher** quote I gave last time. I want to look at it once more here. She said,

We are told we must work and use our talents to create wealth. “*If a man will not work, he shall not eat,*” wrote St. Paul to the Thessalonians ... Nevertheless, the Tenth Commandment—Thou shalt not covet—recognizes that making money and owning things could become selfish activities. But it is not the creation of wealth that is wrong but love of money for its own sake.⁶

The context of her words are important to, for this was not a political speech, but a speech given to the Church of Scotland. She goes on and says,

The spiritual dimension comes in deciding what one does with the wealth. How could we respond to the many calls for help, or invest for the future, or support the wonderful artists and craftsmen whose work also glorifies God, unless we had first worked hard and used our talents to create the

⁶ **Margaret Thatcher**, “Speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (dubbed ‘The Sermon on the Mound’), *Margaret Thatcher Foundation* (May 21, 1988), <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>.

necessary wealth? And remember the woman with the alabaster jar of ointment...

None of this, of course, tells us exactly what kind of political and social institutions we should have. On this point, Christians will very often genuinely disagree, though it is a mark of Christian manners that they will do so with courtesy and mutual respect. What is certain, however, is that any set of social and economic arrangements which is not founded on the acceptance of individual responsibility will do nothing but harm.

We are all responsible for our own actions. We can't blame society if we disobey the law. We simply can't delegate the exercise of mercy and generosity to others. The politicians and other secular powers should strive by their measures to bring out the good in people and to fight down the bad: but they can't create the one or abolish the other. They can only see that the laws encourage the best instincts and convictions of the people...

Nowhere is this more evident than the basic ties of the family which are at the heart of our society and are the very nursery of civic virtue. And it is on the family that we in government build our own policies for welfare, education and care. You recall that Timothy was warned by St. Paul that anyone who neglects to provide for his own house

(meaning his own family) has disowned the faith and is “worse than an infidel.”

We must recognize that modern society is infinitely more complex than that of Biblical times and of course new occasions teach new duties. In our generation, the only way we can ensure that no-one is left without sustenance, help or opportunity, is to have laws to provide for health and education, pensions for the elderly, succour for the sick and disabled. But intervention by the State must never become so great that it effectively removes personal responsibility.

I do not agree with everything Mrs. Thatcher says here. That isn't the point. The point is to see that when it comes to government and work, if the people under that government are not moral and motivated by love of neighbor to help one another, then the only other power there is, is **force**. Combining our passage with forced government intervention is the opposite of its point. But if we are going to speak about government's role in such affairs, we had best also be preaching the Gospel and **the only good news** that can actually change darkened hate-filled hearts to care enough about one another that government doesn't encroach with power.

Idleness and the Gospel

I want to use this as a segue to the benediction of the letter. For, this is the only place in our passage today where we have the gospel. But what I want you to see is that it is the gospel that undergirds this kind of ethic. “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all ... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all” (2Th 3:16, 18). You see? Not only is this a proper, orderly way to end a letter, but it is the backbone of the entire thing.

In fact, the words here form a **chiasm** that extends throughout the whole book. The letter begins with a **greeting + grace and peace** (2Th 1:1-2). It ends with a **benediction + peace and grace** (3:16-18). The next thing said at the beginning of the letter is that their faith is growing abundantly, and that the love of everyone of them for one another is increasing (1:3). But this is precisely how he ends our last long section of the letter on work. “**Brothers, do not grow weary in doing good**” (3:13). This is part of the overall encouragement in the midst of the warnings about idleness. And where does their desire to do good come from?

It comes from God through the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm reviewing a book on abortion for someone and the very beginning states what I want to say very well:

As a pagan, I was quite vocal in my hostility toward God. This was often expressed in my general disdain for those created in His image, and, in particular, disgust for those I thought were useless to me. I was outspoken in favor of eugenics and abortion. But God pulled me out of this hateful rebellion by His grace. He changed my heart to love Him and men. He changed my mind, giving me Christ's. Being a young and immature Christian, I did not have a developed understanding of the image of God in relation to abortion. I knew abortion was wrong, and that I was now against it. I was a Christian, so I was Pro-Life (but I didn't really know what it meant).

In other words, it wasn't arguments or politics or smooth-talk or any device God has given men in this world to persuade that changed his mind. It was one thing: the gospel.

This Jesus Christ has come into the midst of the Thessalonians and given them **peace** and **grace**. He has **justified** them after they were **elected** in eternity past. He is **sanctifying** them even this moment. And because of this, and this

alone, the law or command or tradition or proverb or whatever you want to call it can and does make sense. If they are true Christians, they will want to obey. This is exactly what Thatcher was promoting in his speech—the need for a strong *church*. Not so much policies, but a strong church that preaches the gospel and builds brothers up in the love of one another. That is the only way you can have a government that works the way God intended it. Clearly, the vast and unsearchable amounts of anger that people are living with today with regard to saying nearly anything deemed “political” is occurring because fewer and fewer people do not know Jesus Christ, and therefore do not know how to deal with their anger in a way that is beneficial and constructive to society or themselves. They are simply lost. If this is you, then I urge you to turn to Jesus for forgiveness of your anger, your sloth, or whatever else it is that is keeping you in chains.

Warnings and Discipline

A second way of thinking about this passage is by looking at [the warnings](#) that occur in [vv. 6](#) and [14](#). Here they are. “[Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord](#)

Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is ...” (6). “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” (14). Basically, what Paul is talking about here is a form of church discipline.

These warnings to keep away from them and have nothing to do with them focus on something larger than work. This is the issue of the word translated as “idle” but which really means doing something in a disorderly way, or not according to order. While it happens that the specific point of disorder here is not working, the principle is much larger. For example, that horrible situation in Corinth where a man was actually sleeping with his step-mother (1Co 5:1), didn’t stop there, but they were actually bragging about it, something that not even pagans would do (2). This was the disorder here, and Paul tells them to expel the immoral brother, deliver him over to Satan in hopes that his soul might be saved on the Day of the Lord (4). He then says, “Do not associate with him” (11) and adds the same thing if the man is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler.

What is the purpose of this? Not only is it the salvation of this man’s soul, but it is the protection of the gospel from

those inside the church who are mocking it with their lifestyle or, in other cases, their doctrine. In other words, the only way you can have that strong church that I spoke about a moment ago, is if the people in the church realize the serious lifestyle to which they have been called. While there is great freedom in Christ and greater forgiveness by him, when we openly mock the gospel by behaving in known ways that are contrary to his moral law, especially things that even pagans know such as Cicero did with idleness, then the power of that gospel is replaced with a false gospel, and therefore people are not changed or converted. The church becomes filled with non-regenerate people who pretend religion, and you end up with one horrible mess.

This is one of the reasons why the Reformers all taught that one of the three [marks of the church](#) is discipline. Thus, the *Belgic Confession* (Article 32: The Order and Discipline of the Church) says, “[We accept only what is proper to maintain harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God. To that end excommunication, with all it involves, according to the Word of God, is required.](#)”

Our own Confession says, “[Cases of difficulties or differences—doctrinal or administrative—may arise, touching](#)

on the peace, union, and edification of all churches in general or an individual church.” It then adds something remarkable. “Other cases may occur when a member or members of a church are injured in or by disciplinary action that is not in keeping with truth and order.” (LBC 26:15). This brings me to the flip side of discipline, which is the dangers that can be associated with it.

Men are evil, even godly men. There can be great danger when men, themselves deprived of love of neighbor, begin to feel powerful, untouchable, like priests able to dispense forgiveness, an inquisition able to determine the fate of sinners, and popes ruling over their flock all in one. This is not merely a Roman Catholic problem!

Thus, besides giving them the warning to “keep away,” he warns them about the warning. “Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (15). There is a danger of treating those who need discipline as enemies, even as sub-human. But anyone undergoing discipline is not our enemy. They are people made in the image of God who have fallen under a spell of witchcraft. They are to be warned, but we are to be warned that as we measure it to others, so it will be measured out to us.

Of course, the purpose of all of this is, as we have seen, ultimately so that they may be saved. But in this context of something slightly less sorrowful than 1 Corinthians 5, it is “that he may be ashamed.” Ashamed of what? **Of not working.** Of not providing for his family. Of giving in to rumors and engaging in innuendos and participating in gossip and spreading false doctrine. Shame is something our country and our churches needs more of. For we are a shameless people. We need shame to throw us back on the right track.

Work and Prayer

I want to say a word about the relationship between prayer and work for a moment. Recall that this chapter (and the two verses before it: **2:16-3:5**) are a prayer, and that this prayer acts as the segue to the work discussion. Someone has noticed that the only two things in this letter that Paul tells the Thessalonians to do without ceasing is to pray (**1Th 3:10; 5:17; cf. 1Ti 5:2**) and to work (**1Th 2:9; 2Th 3:8**). He then says,

Praying to God is being in communion with God through acts of adoration, praise, blessing, thanksgiving or petition. Working is acting to maintain or improve one's knowledge and ability in given areas. Praying involves acting (i.e. active prayer) and acting implies praying (i.e. contemplative action) ... Giving thanks to God for whichever reason – or just because he is God (Rev 11:17) – is a form of prayer, whilst a work – that is, a good produced, received, being expected or something declined for a sound reason (Rom 14:6) – can be the motif of a thanksgiving prayer.⁷

In other words, make your prayer a work and make your work a prayer! This is exactly what Paul is doing for them. He prays for them as he works to write this letter, even as he worked as a tent-maker among them. And, he offered up his work as a prayer to God, that God might use it among them to teach them the value of being orderly and doing what God commands. Indeed, there is much to learn here from this text.

As we conclude, there is an interesting, almost throw-away line which is the next to last verse of our letter. In vs. 17 it says, “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

⁷ Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, “Ethics of Prayer and Work in 1 and 2 Thessalonians,” *HTS Theological Studies* 69:1 (2013), 1-8.

This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write” (17). We should spend a moment here.

First, he ends several letters this way. “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand” (1Co 16:21). “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand” (Col 4:18). “I, Paul, write this with my own hand” (Phlm 1:19). “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand” (Gal 6:11). This tells us is that Paul did not usually write his letters with his own hand, but he has someone else do it for him. These scribes wrote down for the Apostle the things he told them to write. In Romans, one of the clever scribes actually puts his name as a memorial for all time, “I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord” (Rom 16:22). He will never be forgotten.

More importantly for this letter, he seems to add this because they were being thrown off, apparently, by false letters presuming to have come from Paul. He told them, “Do not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come” (2Th 2:2). He needed them to know that this word was from him, and therefore that it was from the Lord Jesus himself as he was an Apostle sent to them by Christ. This makes it ironic that

2 Thessalonians is one of those few letters that many liberal scholars like to think is a fake. One does not fake a letter like this!

Let me conclude this way. In 1 Corinthians, he calls the Corinthians, “our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not of tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2Co 3:2-3). His purpose here is to encourage them that indeed, as one “sent” by Christ, the Word that he delivered to them has begun doing His work in their hearts. And by their actions, they demonstrate to everyone around that the message is true.

Given this, it makes the words of any letter in the Scripture doubly important, and in this case, triply so. First, if you are Christ’s, then he has written on your heart his law and gospel, and by his Spirit he is sanctifying you. This has been the theme of Thessalonians since the beginning. Second, this law and gospel comes to you in form of, often, letters of the Bible, the very words of God, able to make you powerful unto salvation and to be conformed to the image of Christ. This is not just any letter. It is a letter from God himself. Third, if the works he brings about in us come from

the Gospel, then the command to work and not be busybodies is all the more striking. For in what we do, we display to the whole world that we belong to Christ, and not the devil, that he bought us, that he died for us, and that he changes the hearts of men through his work and then through our own.

Works Cited:

- Baxter, Richard and William Orme. *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, vol. 2. London: James Duncan, 1830.
- Boston, Thomas. *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston: An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion, Part 2*. Ed. Samuel M'Millan, vol. 2. Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1848.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition*. Trans. Elsie Anne McKee. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009.
- Chaucer. *Tale of Melibee*, A modern English Translation (lines 1581-97). <https://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/teachslf/mel-tran.htm>.
- Loba-Mkole, Jean-Claude. "Ethics of Prayer and Work in 1 and 2 Thessalonians." *HTS Theological Studies* 69:1 (2013): 1-8.
- Watson, Thomas. *The Select Works of the Rev. Thomas Watson, Comprising His Celebrated Body of Divinity, in a Series of Lectures on the Shorter Catechism, and Various Sermons and Treatises*. New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855.
- Thatcher, Margaret. "Speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (dubbed 'The Sermon on the Mound')." *Margaret Thatcher Foundation* (May 21, 1988). <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>.