

HARD WORK IS GOD'S WILL FOR OUR LIVES

II Thessalonians 3: 6-15 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

How many of you believe Jesus is coming soon? I do too. Paul believed it. The faithful believers in Thessalonica did too. But the truth is, some strange things were happening there then, just like they are in America. People were predicting the day of Jesus' return and some said He had already come. What do you think when you pass the billboard signs on the freeway prophesying Jesus will return on May 21, 2011. What happened? Another man was wrong as thousands of others have been. Listen to Paul trying to talk to the Thessalonians in II Thessalonians 2: 1-4. Paul was battling believers who had gotten fictitious letters as if from him saying Jesus had already come again. Other believers had become so excited about the coming of the Lord that they quit their jobs. They simply kicked up their feet and waited for the clouds to break and for Jesus to break through the blue. Can you imagine abandoning your job to wait in excited idleness for Christ to return? That's the setting of our message today on Labor Day Sunday.

Three times in our text today, Paul uses a word to describe the believers in Thessalonica. In verse 6 and 11, Paul uses an adverb translated unruly in verse 6 and undisciplined in verse 11. The Greek word is **ataktos**. It means irregularly, disorderly, with slackness, like soldiers not keeping rank. It is the Greek word for playing truant. In verse 7, Paul uses a form of this adverb—an adjective, **atakteo**. It means virtually the same thing, meaning to behave oneself disorderly. What is truancy? Webster defines truant as a vagabond, a beggar, one who shirks or neglects his duty, or a child who stays away from school without permission or leave. In the earliest writings in Greek, in an apprentice's contract, the father agrees that his son must make good any days on which he absents himself from duty by playing truant. Some of these Thessalonian believers, in their excitement that Jesus was coming, became idle and quit their jobs.

To bring them back to their senses, Paul related to them his own example. All his Christian life, Paul was a workman either as an apostle, an entrepreneur starting beginning churches, or as a tent-maker. Paul worked with a Judaeo-Christian background. The Jewish rabbis almost glorified work. They said, "He who does not teach his son a trade, teaches him to steal." Paul took the Jewish rabbi approach of rabbis also being bakers, barbers, carpenters, and masons, and all other kinds of trades. Paul here is teaching the dignity of work, of honest toil. Paul was one who believed in

the value of working with our hands. Paul here told the Thessalonians, in verse 10, “If anyone will not work, neither let him eat.” A lazy apprentice was to be forbidden to sit down for dinner. I believe we must be certain Paul was not speaking of an unfortunate man or woman who has lost a job and as yet has not secured one. It is the refusal to work that is important in our text. Unemployment, when it has nothing to do with a fault of our own, is not being condemned. On this Labor Day Sunday, I believe God by His Holy Spirit wants us to rethink work and the gift of employment and labor. Paul has five major thoughts for us to ponder today regarding choosing not to work, before we come to the table of the Lord. These thoughts are five major distinctions about work and failing to work that every one of us need to understand and rejoice in today on this Labor Day Sunday.

FAILURE TO BE WILLING TO WORK DOES NOT REMOVE BELIEVERS FROM THE BODY OF CHRIST. THEY ARE STILL BROTHERS IN THE LORD, BUT THEY MUST BE WARNED. (I.)

Turn to II Thessalonians 3: 6. Paul begins this strong teaching saying, “Now we command you, brethren, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life of truancy and not according to the tradition which you received from us.” Paul’s strong appeal is to his brethren. But notice what brothers and sisters can get involved in. I observe 4 areas Paul calls to mind in Thessalonians: The first, **(1) is Loafing, idleness—doing absolutely nothing.** We find this in verse 11. “For we hear that some among you, are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all.” This doesn’t include the whole church. Paul is careful not to say it is everyone. He says in verse 11—“For we hear that some of you are leading an undisciplined, ataktos—truant life, doing no work at all.” Beloved, God has no softspot for drifting and holding up signs—“Will work for food/beer/gas.” Certainly, there are exceptions that prove the rule. Just last summer below Pastor Will’s upper window of his study he could hear a man training another young man in how to wave signs. That man claims to be a Christian, and I believe he is, but he is a disobedient saint, who has learned a trade of begging.

Another area of failure to work is **spending time spinning tales and spreading exciting gossip. (2)** Notice back in the context of II Thessalonians 2: 2, some of the brothers were involved in sabotaging Paul and spreading rumors that the Day of the Lord had already come. Even spiritual gossiping is not viewed by the Lord as a substitute for hard work. God hates it—even if we are gossiping about Christ’s return as some of the

Thessalonians were. A third area of failing to work was **trying to live off of the support of the rest of the church body without personally doing God's bidding or following God's calling.** (3) Notice II Thessalonians 3: 12 states, "Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread." The clear indication relates to people who learn to freeload off the church. Helping unemployed fellow believers is so important. Today we will take up a benevolent fund for this very purpose. Nevertheless, there are people right in this town—some whom I have known for most of my 35 years of pastoring here, and others since I began the pastoral ministry 44 years ago—some who choose not to work and who go from church to church begging and sponging off of hard-working saints. God hates it. He tells us in verse 8—not to eat anyone's bread without paying for it. The essence of this is not to prevent us from having folks over for dinner, but to guard against any of us attempting to get something for nothing by idleness or laziness.

Beloved, Paul is not teaching that pastors are to be bi-vocational, as he sometimes was. Contrary, in I Timothy 5: 17-18, Paul is clear, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the scripture says, "You must not muzzle the ox while he is treshing," and "The laborer is worthy of his wages." Beloved, I testify to you that I see all our pastors at work putting in far more hours than you may believe. They are worthy of their wages and their benefits—Paul states—"worthy of double honor." There are believers in America who stand for preachers not making their living in full time employment for the Lord and His church. I rebuke those views for they oppose the word of God, and I have found they often come from individuals who want an excuse not to give their tithes and offerings to the storehouse. Turn with me to I Corinthians 9:7-14. Some of the hardest work there is, is obeying God's call to sacred service in His church. I urge you to pray for all seven of us as pastors. Be aware, there are lazy and idle preachers and pastors. There are none among you, beloved in that category.

There is a 4th category beyond loafing because Jesus is coming soon, spinning tales and spreading gossip, expecting the church to pay your bills without working or obeying God's call to work. This 4th category is "acting like busybodies." Notice II Thess. 3: 11c. Did you know what this sin is? It is interfering with business in the body of Christ that properly belongs to others. Paul brought this up in his first epistle, and it had apparently grown worse. I Thess. 4: 11 is plain. "But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more,

and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you.” Also, Paul urged the Thessalonians in I Thessalonians 5: 14, saying, “And we urge you, brethren, “admonish the unruly.” That’s those who are truant from working for a living. But remember, all these warnings are addressed not to unbelievers, but to believers. Paul adds in II Thessalonians 3: 15, speaking of those who will not work—saying, “And yet, do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” Don’t forget this first major distinction about work and the failure to work. What is it again? Failure to work does not remove us from the body of Christ. We are still brothers in the Lord, but we must be warned. There is a second major distinction:

FAILURE TO BE WILLING TO WORK SHOULD BE A SIGNAL FOR THE BODY OF CHRIST TO WITDRAW FROM INTIMATE FELLOWSHIP. (II.)

This is a controversial passage for many, but it is the eternal word of God which says in II Thessalonians 3: 6, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly—truant from work, life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.” Sometimes instruction is in vain, and church discipline is necessary. The discipline for the idle is limited fellowship. This is not complete outright ostracism or shunning. No, verse 15 says we are to admonish him as a brother. So what does it mean in verse 14, “And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame.” This is not the same as the disfellowshipping of the incestuous man in I Corinthians 5: 9-13. This withdrawal of fellowship. The best translation is not that we are to put the man to shame, but that the limited fellowship will make him feel ashamed. Paul is not calling for censure or unnecessary harshness in marking such a man. So what does it mean to make special not—v. 14, of him? I see a similar marking of individuals in Romans 16: 17 where we read, “Now I urge you, brethren, to keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teachings which you learned, and turn away from them.” Balance is needed in the body of Christ on this. The church today largely ignores this warning and need at times to withdraw intimate fellowship. In other cases, I have seen the church shun and mark a man for life. What is the point of a man being ashamed? The point is that he will come to repentance and return to the intimate fellowship he once knew. Whenever there is discipline of any kind, we all tend toward abuse or neglect. God help us to obey the Word, no more, no less. Thirdly,

FAILURE TO BE WILLING TO WORK MAY BE RIGHT, BUT IT OPPOSES THE TRADITION OF GOD’S CHURCH AND IT GOES AGAINST PAUL’S MODEL. (III.)

Notice Paul talks about opposing the tradition handed down to us in the church, in the body of Christ. Paul also speaks against not going against the model of work in his own life. Paul has an important principle here in verse 9. He writes, “Not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, that you might follow our example.” Paul is speaking of having a right for the churches to pay him for his labor. But if the churches fail to do so, he does not claim his due or his right. The whole picture of Paul’s model is to teach us to waive our rights and not to insist on our rights. That is the model of our Lord. Jesus gave up His rights in glory when He came incarnate to us in Bethlehem. I always get uneasy, nervous and feel disturbed by any decision by us in relationships to insist on our rights. So often in the body, we hear— “I have the right to carry a grudge for life—like Esau did.” “I have the right to never forgive you.” “I have the right to give you a piece of my mind.” “I have the right to divorce you.” On and on it goes. Even in marriage, Jesus admitted that because of hardness of heart, Matthew 19: 8, Moses permitted men to divorce their wives, (It is their right—because of immorality—Mt. 19: 9) but Jesus added, “from the beginning it has not been this way... What God has joined together, let no one separate.” – Mt. 19: 6. As a superintendent, I have seen pastors who refuse to pick up a mop or who refuse to sweep the floor. They refuse to paint or get dirty on a work day. They can point to their right as a pastor, but remember, Jesus girded a towel and washed His disciples’ feet. Teenagers may say, “I have a right to tell you, Dad or Mom, I don’t have to obey you at age 18.” Beloved, Jesus gave up his rights and stayed in His home under his mother and step father until the age of 30. Paul said in Philippians 2: 5, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” You may say, “I did my stint in the nursery when my children were young. I don’t need to work back there now. I have earned my right not to work in the nursery.” Claiming rights is so selfish and dangerous, and it always ends in sorrow. I know of churches that are dying because the older women will not work in the nursery. A fourth distinction: i

FAILURE TO BE WILLING TO WORK SHOULD ALERT BELIEVERS TO THE NEED FOR THEM TO FAST AND NOT EAT.

(IV.) Verse 10 tells us, “For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: If anyone will not work, neither let him eat.” Refusing to work means we should refrain from eating. Being unable to find

employment has nothing to do with being unwilling to work. A Christian man, beloved, must not be a drone. He must be a worker. Any pious sluggard who says, "I don't want to work. The church owes me a living," should start fasting until he awakens to his sin and the error of his ways. In essence, Paul is calling on us as saints not to buy a meal for a brother in Jesus who refuses or is unwilling to work. Let him go hungry. Our hearts are to go out to those who are truly in need. Yet, we are to withhold our sympathy from brothers in Christ who refuse to do an honest day's work. Beloved, Christ is our example. In His self-sacrificing love for His own, His sons and daughters should loathe the idea of choosing to become a burden to others. Fifthly and lastly,

FAILURE TO BE WILLING TO WORK IS PROOF WE HAVE GROWN WEARY IN WELL DOING. (V.) Notice this wonderful word of encouragement on Labor Day Sunday. Verse 13 commands us, "But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good." Saved sinners God enables to be His saints and saints are all workers in the vineyard, in the harvest of the Lord. Beloved, I call us all back to the joy and blessing and glory and privilege of hard work. I close with the old old hymn by Elizabeth Mills, "We'll Work Till Jesus Comes." "O land of rest, for thee I sigh! When will the moment come, When I shall lay my armor by, And dwell in peace at home? We'll work till Jesus comes, We'll work till Jesus comes, We'll work till Jesus comes, and we'll be gathered home! Let's bow!