

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Work: A Noble Christian Duty, Part 2

Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9

Code: 53-15

We find ourselves in the 3rd chapter now, verses 6 through 15, our text, and we've entitled the section, "Work: A Christian Duty." Before we look at the text specifically, I felt compelled this week to do a little bit of background study and perhaps get a broader perspective of the issue of work so that we understand the context better in which Paul writes and can apply it better in our own world. We live in a culture, frankly, that has a very skewed work ethic. On the one hand, you have workaholics; on the other hand, you have lazy, idle, and loafing people who choose not to work at all, but in the middle, the great mass of people may work but have a very wrong concept of work.

I suppose we've all seen the bumper sticker sign that says, "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go," which views work as a very crass thing. It sees work as mercenary, work as simply a way to pay off your debts, to fund your lifestyle, and we've all seen those little license plate frames that have such profound philosophy. They say things like, "I'd rather be fishing," "I'd rather be flying," "I'd rather be golfing," "I'd rather be skiing," "I'd rather be sailing," "I'd rather be hiking," "I'd rather be four-wheeling," et cetera, et cetera. In other words, whatever it is I'm doing, it certainly has no value when compared with play. We're a very infantile, adolescent kind of society. We really don't want to grow up. In fact, I saw a bumper sticker that said, "He wins who dies with the most toys" on the back of a BMW.

All this sort of conveys the current idea that people would rather play than work and they depreciate the value of work. Work is only the way to finance pleasure, so it's a necessary evil. It's a way to pay off the debts that you've accumulated in trying to elevate your lifestyle. Without a proper work ethic, we don't work well, we don't do quality work, we don't work with excellence, we don't do the things that ought to be done. Going back a little bit to our bumper sticker theology or philosophy, I have seen a bumper sticker that says, "Work fascinates me. I can sit and watch it for hours." And you've all seen the little sign that says, "Thank God it's Friday." I saw one that said, "Hard work may not kill me, but why take a chance?"

Now, I want to know if you have ever seen a sign on the back of a speed boat that said, "I'd rather be working" or a license plate that said, "Thank God it's Monday" – not likely. We really do have a warped perspective on the matter of work. Our materialistic, self-indulgent, adolescent, infantile, child-like culture has a warped view of the place and role of work, but honestly, it isn't anything new. Go with me back to the book of Ecclesiastes.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, that fascinating wisdom literature of the Old Testament sandwiched there between Proverbs and Song of Solomon, we have a look at human thought. This is probably the one book in the Bible that uniquely sets out a worldly philosophy. It is exposed as such in the book but nonetheless you have the preacher, the writer, assessing life from a purely mundane human viewpoint, and he looks at life and he looks at work like anybody who lives does because work is a reality, and you find a series of questions that he asks. For example, in chapter 1 verse 3, “What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?”

The question is: Why work? What advantage is there to work? We have all this work to do, it is incessant, it is constant, but to what advantage is it? Over in chapter 2, he still hasn't escaped his query. In verse 22: “For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun?” What do you really get out of it? What does it really produce and how does it benefit?

Chapter 3 hasn't released him from his dilemma, either. In verse 9 of chapter 3, “What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils?” And we find ourselves in chapter 5 and he's still asking the same question in verse 16. He says, “Work frankly is a grievous evil,” and at the end he says, “What is the advantage of him who toils for the wind?” – for nothing. What good is work? What purpose does it have? What function? What value? This is a very cynical view of work, and even the question itself shows something of the disappointment of the writer, something of the cynicism in his own heart as he looks at work with the wrong perspective.

Now, he answers his own question. He really does. The answer isn't, frankly, very hopeful. Look at chapter 2, for example, and let's see how he views the answer to his own question. Verse 11, he says, “I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted and behold, all was vanity” – nothing, useless – “striving after wind.” In other words, something you can't touch and capture. “And there was no profit under the sun.” So he says work was without benefit, it produced nothing, it accomplished nothing, and it gave no real, lasting benefit. Over in the same chapter, down a little bit, verse 18, he's still musing about this same futility of work so he said, “I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me.” I hated the idea of all this work and everything that I had done and somebody else was going to get the benefit from it.

Down in verse 22, where he asked the question, he follows up in verse 23, “Because all his days his task is painful and grievous, even at night his mind doesn't rest, this too is vanity.” It isn't bad enough that I have to work all day, but I stay awake all night thinking about the work I have to do all day. What use is this? Work is, frankly, a pain. Chapter 4, carry on his cynicism, in verse 4 of chapter 4, he says, “And I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity in striving after wind.” He says I don't even like free enterprise, I don't even like a competitive marketplace, all it does is pit us against each other. “The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh.” In other words, some people just give up.

“One handful of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.” In other words, who wants to work when you can rest? Rest is much more desirable than work. “So I looked at it all and it all was vanity under the sun,” verse 7. Just to show you how useless it is, there was a certain man, verse 8 says, without a dependent. I mean he had nobody to support. He was all alone. He didn’t have a son, he didn’t have a brother. Yet there was no end to all his labor. I mean even single people have to work hard for the necessities of life. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches” – and he never asked – “and for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?” There it is. The philosophy is work gets in the way of pleasure. Work is not pleasure. Work is not fun. It’s not enjoyable. It’s not satisfying. It just gets in the way of leisure, recreation, rest, which is true pleasure.

So he says here’s a poor guy, he doesn’t even have a dependent, he’s not married, hasn’t got kids, doesn’t have relatives, and he has to continually work, and he’s never satisfied with his riches, and the question keeps popping up but never asked: Why am I doing this? All this work is simply depriving me of pleasure. What emptiness. What a grievous way to live.

Chapter 5 focuses on the same issue. We see in verses 15 and 16 of chapter 5, talking about man coming into the world naked from his mother’s womb, so he returns as he came. He comes in naked, he goes out naked. The point being you don’t bring anything when you arrive and you don’t take anything when you go. You’re stripped bare. He’ll take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand. Nothing goes out with you. This, too, is a grievous evil. Exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? That old adage, “You can’t take it with you.” Somebody put it this way: “I’ve never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul.”

Chapter 6 verse 7 states the same thing in different terms. All a man’s labor is for his mouth. You just eat it up and yet your appetite is never satisfied. I work all day so I can eat and I’m hungry tomorrow. It just doesn’t seem to have any real point, work. But even the writer of Ecclesiastes knows that’s not the end of the discussion. He asks the question and then he answers it with a typical mercenary, self-serving, lazy, worldling’s perspective, but he doesn’t stop there. You can’t possibly live a satisfying life if that’s how you view work. So he adds what is necessary. Look at chapter 2 verse 24. Here is what must be said. “There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. How can he do that? This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God.” Here’s the key – you have to see work as a gift from God.

You must see work as a gift of God. In chapter 3 verse 13, he says, “Moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor.” Why? Because he sees it as the gift of God. Chapter 5 verse 19, the same thing, “Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his work – this is the gift of God.” And he doesn’t even consider his life – years – verse 20 says. “God keeps him occupied with his work, which provides gladness for his heart.”

What the writer of Ecclesiastes is saying to his contemporary philosophical, cynical world is that work must be viewed as a gift from God. It is not some kind of a sub-standard, secondary, lesser activity which is meant to do nothing but finance pleasure. It is in itself a gift from God. You say, "In what sense is work a gift from God?" I'll give you several. One, it is a means of glorifying God, our Creator, by using the skills He gave us. It is a means of glorifying God, our Creator, by using the skills He gave us. When you work with your mind and you achieve and accomplish with the skill of your thinking and your intellect, when you work with your voice and you demonstrate leadership ability and the ability to motivate and stimulate and move people and clarify issues and give directions, you are demonstrating a divinely granted skill that came to you through the Creator.

When you use your hands to accomplish skillful things and do beautiful work by manual labor, when you use your strength to move things that are heavy, when you use a facility of a delicate touch to accomplish something that is delicately beautiful, you are demonstrating the Creator's glory as it's on display through His creation. If you think a flower shows the glory of God, look at a man or look at a woman and see the majesty and the genius of the mind of God. Work, then, is a gift by which we glorify God as we demonstrate His creative genius manifest in our own body and mind and soul.

Secondly, work is a gift from God because it is a means of providing value or meaning or fulfillment to life. The sense of accomplishing something, we all know that. We all know that deep soul satisfaction that we have accomplished something, that we have done something, and we've held it up and said, "I've done it well." We know about the writer whose wastebasket is filled with papers folded up and thrown away because they didn't achieve the level of accomplishment that he demands of himself, and finally the masterpiece comes forth. We all know about the artist whose bin is full of canvases that didn't exactly express what he felt in his soul and saw with his eye, and finally the canvas of genius emerges.

We know the student who comes to the end of his examination and knows that he's achieved the standard that must be achieved if he is to gain the degree. We know the one who performs at the highest level of skill in whatever it is that he does and therefore can stand back with pride and say, "I made that, I did that, I accomplished that." That's a very fulfilling thing. We are very goal-oriented people, like God is a goal-oriented God, who is always achieving His ultimate desires, and we have those dreams and goals and visions, and achieving those is all a part of being fully human in the sense that we are even in the image of God accomplishing things beneficial and fulfilling.

There's a third reason why work is a gift from God, and that is because it prevents us from idleness. It prevents us from idleness, which is spiritually very deadly. It occupies us. It keeps us busy, and as we remember the old adage that idle hands are a plaything for the devil, we understand that very well. It occupies us in meaningful tasks rather than leaving us idle to do those things which are harmful.

Fourthly, work is a gift from God because it is a means of providing for the needs of life. God has given work to us as a way in which we can gain wealth, which is a way in which we can purchase our food. In an agrarian culture, work was the means of getting the food. In our culture, it's the means of getting the money to get the food, but nonetheless it is the source of our life. God has given us food, God has given us shelter, God has given us drink and sustenance, God has given us the provision of clothing, but God has given us work as the means to acquiring all of it. So work is a noble thing by which we sustain the necessities of life.

And finally, we can say work is a gift from God because it is a means of serving mankind. It is a means of serving humanity. From the person who pumps the gas at the gas station or operates the gas station or works upon the engine of the car so that it runs, he is contributing to the well-being of the individual he serves and his ability to do his job and to meet his appointments and to be with his family and to go where he wants to go all the way to the one who builds the car in the first place, who makes transportation possible, all the way to the person who makes the roads and paves the roads and makes sure they go where they're supposed to go, and to the man who paints the signs, who enables us to get off at the right place and get back on where we're supposed to, all the way to the people working in the medical field who provide for our physical well-being, the folks who serve us food when we go out to eat or sell it to us in the market, people who teach us in school, the folks who come and take care of our yard or fix our plumbing, all of those people render a service to mankind by which his life is made more pleasing.

Work is a gift from God, and even those foolish people who want only leisure want to make sure that everybody around them is working so that they can enjoy doing nothing.

Sadly, I think, for many Christians, work has lost its intrinsic value. I believe that God has given you skills to be applied in a certain kind of work, which uniquely geared to you will bring you satisfaction and bring God glory. Work should not lose its intrinsic value. It is not simply a means to pay your debts. It is not simply a way to fund your pleasure and to finance your joys. It is in itself valuable, it is a gift from God. Not only is work a gift from God, it is a command of God.

I wonder whether we really understand that. We make a lot about the command in Exodus 20 but very often forget to emphasize the main point. You remember the command? It goes like this, "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath – or a rest – for the Lord your God." We like to emphasize the Sabbath. Rarely do you hear anybody say anything about the six days of work. We talk about a five-day work week in America, and some people talk about a four-day work week. God talks about a six-day work week. You say, "Is He saying that we are commanded to be on our jobs six days?" No, you know how it works. You're on the job five days and the sixth day you fix the house and the car and the yard and you run all the errands and you – that's work, that's all part of sustenance. The seventh day is to be devoted to the Lord.

You understand, then, that God has commanded us to work. That is a command. Six days you are to labor. God designs for man work. We can't have a low view of work if God has such a high view of it. I mean it's right in there in that list with other things like "You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol." It's in there with "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." Pretty serious list. It's one of those things we owe to God – work. He gave us the gift of work. We owe Him the use of the gift He gave. And I really believe that your vocation should suit you and the way God has designed you so that it is satisfying and fulfilling, and I believe if you're living in the Will of God, God will provide that expression of His giftedness in you. You cannot have a low view of work when you understand that it is a gift from God and that it is a command of God.

Furthermore, you can't have a low view of work when you understand that God has even given us the example of work. The greatest worker in the universe is God. The truth of the matter is if He ever took a day off, we'd all be done. God is a worker. Scripture talks about the work of God, the works of God. Often the Bible describes His works, and I suppose you could sum them up maybe with five categories. Whenever you see in Scripture the work of God, it usually falls into these categories. One, the work of creation. God is a worker and He worked in creation, and there's still a sense in which He continues to procreate that creation, and there may even be an ongoing creative work as the Lord Jesus said He was going to heaven to prepare a place for us. So God is the Creator, and that's one category of His work.

Secondly, He is the controller and He continues in the preservation of all that He has created. He upholds it by the Word of His power, and so God works in preservation, sustaining everything. The reason that little tiny atoms don't fly apart isn't because there is some glue in them that can be identified. The scientists can't identify it. What it is is the power of God. God has to hold them together, and He does that by His sustaining power. That's His work. We see also the work of God in providence. God's work can be seen in providence as He orchestrates all the various factors of His entire universe to accomplish His purpose sovereignly.

Occasionally we see God's work in miraculous ways. The category of miracle where God suspends natural law and does something that has no natural explanation. And then, the last two, we see God's work in judgment and God's work in redemption. God is a worker. He works in creation. He works in controlling and sustaining His universe. He works in providence and miracle and He works in judgment and He works in redemption. God is a worker. Furthermore, Jesus is a worker. Jesus, we would expect being a worker because He is God and He said Himself in John 9:4, "I must work the works of Him who sent Me." In John 4:34, He said it was His food "to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work," and in John 5:17, He said, "My Father is working still and I am working."

Jesus Christ is right now doing a redeeming work in the hearts of people across the world. He's doing the work of building His church. He's doing the work of sitting at the right hand of the Father and

sustaining His church through His high priestly intercession. He's doing the work of preparing a place for us. He's doing a work of dispatching angels to be ministering spirits to His church. He's doing the work of indwelling and energizing His people. He's doing all these things and will continue until the work of the final redemption of the universe, and even then He will work forever and ever in enterprises divine as will you and I, praising and glorifying and serving God for all eternity. You cannot have a low view of work when you understand Jesus is a worker and God is a worker and work is commanded and work is a gift from God.

Now, somebody is going to jump in and say, "Now, wait a minute. Isn't work a result of the curse?" Well, let's go back to Genesis and find out. "Don't we work because we were cursed? I mean if there had never been a fall, wouldn't we just be playing around in the garden? We wouldn't be working, would we?" Well, let's find out. Genesis chapter 3 verse 17, "To Adam, God said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife' – it's not always a good thing to do, men. That's in the Bible, I mean I didn't say that. "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, "You shall not eat from it.'"" In other words, because you've sinned, watch this, "Cursed is the ground because of you, so in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground."

Some would read that and say, "Well, it seems like toil and sweat and work is a result of a cursed earth, and so that work is the product of the fall." It's not true. Go back to Genesis chapter 2. Genesis chapter 2 verse 15 – before the fall: "The Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it." That's work. This is noble work, exalted work, work of a man unstained with sin, work on an earth unstained with sin. Somebody put it this way, "God designed man to be a gardener but the fall made him a farmer." I don't know that that quite says it but that's close. God designed man simply to care for it, to reap its benefits, to harvest it, as it were, to enjoy it, to make it flourish. Then the fall caused thorns and thistles and briars and weeds to make it difficult. The fall did not invent work, didn't introduce work, it just cursed it. Always, man was designed to be a worker because he was made in the image of God.

Go back to chapter 1 of Genesis, verse 26: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image according to our likeness.'" Go down to verse 27, "And God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Now, it's pretty clear there, verse 26 and 27, that we're talking about the image of God, but how is the image of God to be defined? And theologians have debated this since the go. This is an age-old discussion, but it seems to me that there's a simple answer to this initially. If God says in verse 26, "Let's make man in our image," and in verse 27, "And God made man in His image," what comes between those two things should somehow define that image. And what does it say? "Let them rule over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping that creeps on the earth."

What is the image of God? What does it mean to be created in the image of God? It means that man is given dominion, authority, rule. He is given the responsibility to care for and to use all the rest of the creation – all of it. It was all there for him to enjoy, to smell and to touch and to eat and to prepare for others. There was work involved in dominion. There was work involved in ruling and tending to all of these creatures. It's not a kind of work we can understand, really, because we don't know the kind of work that Adam did then because we don't know what it is to live in an uncursed world, right? But it was nonetheless his job, it says in 2:15, to cultivate, to tend, to care for, to nurture into flourishing the earth, and that the image of God in him was that he would be a worker like God was a worker.

Just as the Trinity is involved in ruling and authority and dominion and tending and caring for this whole creation, man is as well to work in harnessing, as it were, the wonders of all of this creation for his own joy and goodness. So work wasn't initiated by the fall, it was just cursed. It became a burden. It is now a punishment. Just like women having pain in childbearing, there would have been children prior to the fall, there would have been children, no question about that, but there wouldn't have been any pain in having them. The fall didn't introduce childbearing; it just brought the pain into it. And there was work before the fall. The fall didn't introduce work; it just brought the pain to it.

But there's still a benefit. Even with the pain, a baby is a joy, and even with the pain, the product of the work is a joy. Even with the pain, the baby can be to the glory of God. Even with the pain, the work can be to the glory of God – and it should be. So work neither began nor ceased with the fall, it just took a different shape. It became a curse rather than an unmitigated blessing.

Now, follow this. As Christians, then, we, by the power of Christ operating in our lives, have the opportunity to elevate work back to its point of dignity. That is why the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians and the Colossians – Ephesians 6, Colossians 3 – and said, “In your work, do it unto the Lord and not to men.” Remember those two passages we covered last time? Ephesians 6:5-9 and then over Colossians chapter 3, do your work as unto the Lord. It is a product, it is a result of a Spirit-filled life, and the Christian, just like we can bring the dignity back into marriage, can bring dignity back into work, and we can see it for what it is, a gift of God, a means to glorifying God, a means to having value and significance and fulfillment in life, a means to keeping us away from sin, a means to providing our needs and serving mankind. We restore the dignity and the glory, as it were, to work. We take it out of the category of being a drudgery or a mercenary means by which we finance our pleasure. We make work valuable to God and to us and our family and others.

The biblical viewpoint is the viewpoint that we must have. Human work is a part of the divine plan for history, but only Christians really understand its true glory because we do it as unto the Lord and not unto men. We have to regard work, then, as a creation mandate, as a component of the image of God, as a natural law invested with inherent dignity. It's just God's way for man. It's our part in the creation, and we can do it to His praise.

Look at Psalm 104, I think a refreshing and lovely passage related to our theme, because of the simplicity with which it inserts the priority of work. In Psalm 104, the psalmist is talking about how God takes care of His creation, and he sees God initially clothed with splendor and majesty and he sees Him in His heavenly glory. He sees Him establishing heavens and earth, and verse 5, He's establishing the earth, and he sees the whole flow of creation coming down, and you can see it all there, mountains rise up, verse 8, and valleys sink down, and verse 10, springs come into the valley and they flow between the mountains, and all the animals are there and they drink the water, and then you see the heavens and the birds and the birds are singing and the earth feels the rain and the grass grows and the vegetation – look at verse 14, how interesting. “He causes the grass to grow for the cattle and vegetation for the pleasure of man.” Is that what it says? No. “For the labor of man so that he may bring forth food from the earth.” It's just part of the natural course.

It is a creation mandate, a natural law that man works to bring out his food. I mean it would be so simple if there were just, you know, hamburger trees or in my family, Snicker trees, you just pick your food. It isn't that way. God has made it all, and in the whole design, man just brings the food out of the ground by his labor. And then he goes on to talk about the fact that man has to provide for his own drink and sustenance through wine and makes his heart glad and provides the food that sustains his heart. Then he talks about the trees and the birds and their nests and the high mountains and the cliffs and – he's just describing how the world operates. He talks in verse 19 about the moon and how it affects the seasons and the sun and its place. He talks about darkness and night and the beasts of the forest prowling and the lions. It's just the normal, natural course of life, and then in verse 23 he just slips this in: “Man goes forth to his work and to his labor until evening.” It's just like it belongs with all the other instinctive things. I mean the young lions know how to go after their prey. The beasts know how to prowl, those nocturnal animals that go out at night, and man just goes to his work and his labor until the evening.

“O Lord,” verse 24, “how many are Your works? In wisdom You have made them all.” I mean it's just a part of the natural order of things that we work. So work can be redeemed from the curse's effects by the awareness that it's the natural course of things, that it bears God's image and approval, that it fulfills God's purpose for the use of His creation and that it is God who calls us to work and it is God who skills us for certain vocations and it is for His glory and our fulfillment and the benefit of others when we work as we ought to work. As believers, we are then called to restore the dignity of work, to elevate it to where it ought to be.

Now, if you understand that, you can now turn to 2 Thessalonians, and now you'll understand why the apostle Paul is so concerned about people in this church who won't work. It doesn't make any sense in comparison with what he knows to be the Will of God, and so in verses 6 through 15, he addresses this problem of people who won't work. Somebody might say, “Well, it seems like a trivial thing to be a Bible issue.” It isn't trivial at all if you understand what I've just gone through. It isn't trivial at all. It's

part of the image of God, a very significant and central part. It's God's design by which you can glorify Him, by which you can fulfill your own life, by which you can benefit those around you by providing the necessary things and by which you can contribute kindly to the circumstance of society. It is a command that must be obeyed. It is a dignified thing that existed even before the fall and will exist for all eternity as we work throughout the ages and ages to serve our Lord.

But some people in the Thessalonian church missed this. They didn't work and they weren't about to work. When Paul was with them and founded the church, he confronted them and he said, "You need to work." They didn't listen. When he wrote his first letter back to them, 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verse 14, he reminded them again because he had heard the word that they weren't working in spite of what he had said and so he reminds them, "You need to work, you cannot shirk your work." Actually, 1 Thessalonians 4:11: "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work, just as we commanded you."

He's had to get tough with these people. You say, "Why?" Because they lived in a Greek world and the Greeks believed that work was demeaning. In fact, they said it was beneath the dignity of a free man. They said it was sordid, it was degrading. To labor was to be enslaved by the physical, and they were in a philosophical dualism in their philosophy by which they had come to the belief that mind was – mind or spirit was good and flesh or matter was evil. The physical world, then, and work must be avoided and so they had developed this slavery where there were millions of slaves doing all of the work and the freemen would engage in art, philosophy, sophistry, politics, anything that was mental and spiritual, the loftiness of art and talk and verbal wisdom, efforts of the mind. Only slaves did work.

And this pervasive Greek philosophy had found its way early on into the Thessalonian church because after all, it was part and parcel of their culture. All it would take was a few people in the church who felt strongly about this to sell a few other weaker people on it and it would be a real movement. Maybe there were even some holdovers from Judaism who had found their way into the church or been influenced by Judaism who had been somehow affected by the scribes, you know, who used to say that if you're doing anything less than a lifetime of contemplation of the law, you've lowered yourself. And maybe there were some who were saying, "Well, now that we're Christians and we have the Word of God, maybe we ought to take a scribal perspective and do nothing but study the Bible."

And all of this probably got exacerbated because somebody came along and said, "Jesus is coming very soon, you're already in the day of the Lord, the end of the age is near, it's coming very fast," and they reasoned to themselves, "Well, if we're in the end of the age, no sense in going to work, we better use the time to evangelize." We don't know all of the components but it's not hard to reconstruct something of a scenario like that, and so they were perhaps saying, "Well, we need to study the Bible, that's the lofty thing, we need to contemplate God and we need to muse and we need

to talk and we need to express ourselves and we need to evangelize. Work? We don't want to do that. It's near the end of the age, the Lord is coming, it's beneath the level of Bible study as an enterprise and furthermore it belongs to slaves and not freemen."

Well, the problem with this was not only were they in defiance of a principle which God had built in to the very warp and woof of creation, as well as made a law in the Old Testament and dignified in the New, but they were also making themselves deadbeats. They were sponging off the rest of the congregation, which wasn't real good for church unity – very presumptuous. And so Paul writes – verses 6 to 15 – to address the problem of people who won't work. This is the third time he's had to do it so he's very tough, he's very strong.

Back in the first letter – chapter 5 verse 14 – he even said, "Admonish the unruly." The same word being used here meaning those who refused to work, most likely. Those who were the busybodies. So this was a major problem, and now as he writes, he's taking serious action. I would call this third step discipline if I were comparing it to Matthew 18. First you go to them. If they don't listen, you go back with two or three witnesses. If you don't listen, you tell the whole church to go after them and call them back from their iniquity, and that's what he's doing here. He's calling the church to take a look at these people, note them, and deal with them because they won't work.

As the text flows from verse 6 on, there are six incentives to work – six incentives to work. Six motivations, six compulsions that he lays on these people. One is disfellowship. Disfellowship, the threat of being alienated from the church. Verse 6: "We command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life" – this, of course, as I noted earlier, has to do with not working – "and not according to the tradition which you received from us." We taught you this, you know what you're to do in terms of work, now you've got people who refuse to work, they lead this unruly life – stay away from them, that is disfellowship. That, then, becomes the first motivating force on those people who won't work – no worship, no Lord's table, no social contact, and no exception – every brother – every brother, you stay aloof. Now, you need to call them away from their sin. Down in verse 15, you need to admonish them, that is to warn them of the way they're going as your Christian brother, but you don't allow them to participate in the normal life of the church. You disfellowship them.

This is really drastic action, but it's a serious sin not to work – a serious sin. It is against the very design of God, the image of God, the course of nature, the creation mandate. It is against the command of the Old Testament. It is against the purpose of God for His displaying glory through you. It is against His design for how you contribute to your necessities and the needs of others. It is a serious issue not to work.

Now, listen carefully. He is not talking about people who want to work but can't find work, and I know there are people across the world like that, who would give anything to work but they can't find work

and there are some in our church. He is not talking about people who would work but can't physically work because they have an infirmity or a disability and they cannot work. He's talking about people who can work, have opportunity to work, but won't work, and he says these kind of quote/unquote deadbeats, you need to stay away from. Admonish them and warn them, but don't let them participate in the fellowship of the church. This is serious discipline. Now, we discussed that last time and I won't say any more.

Let's go to the second motivation, the second compulsion, and it's all we'll have time for, just a brief one. Verses 7 to 9, the second one is example. The second compulsion is example. "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you, 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."

There you have it, verse 7, verse 9, the word example, verse 9, the word model. Paul says, "Look, isn't it motivation for you folks that you saw my life and the life of Silvanus or Silas and Timothy when we were with you?" So in verse 7, he says, "You yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We have set the pattern." The word "follow," mimeisthai, from which we get mimic – mimic, imitate. Paul had set an example, a pattern in his own life, and he wanted it to be the pattern they would follow.

Listen carefully. Paul did not always forego receiving money or food. There were many times when Paul's needs were met, when people gave him money, when people provided for his sustenance, and there were many occasions when he received kindnesses like that, but there was a big issue here in Thessalonica, and it must have been the same thing in Corinth because there he did the same thing. And there were times in his ministry when he refused to receive anything gratis but he insisted on working. It wasn't that he didn't deserve it, he says that in verse 9, he had a right to it, but it was that he was trying to dignify work. He didn't want anyone saying, "Well, after all, all Paul does is preach and teach and study, he doesn't work."

So in order to waylay such criticism here in Thessalonica, when he was there, he worked. Now, of course, there was nobody there to support him when he arrived anyway because there was no church, but he set an example. According to Acts 18, he made tents or, literally, was a leather worker. He worked with hides. He had a task that he knew how to do. He had a trade that he was skilled in, and so he said, "Look, I gave you an example. I didn't want you to be confused about it, it was a big issue, so I set you – an example for you, and I want you to look back and remember that example and follow that example because we didn't act in an undisciplined, unruly manner among you. When we were there in your midst, we were not busybodies, we were not sponging off people." Verse 8: "Nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it." What a statement.

The word “undisciplined” there means out of line. He’s referring to loafers and idlers. We never marched out of step. We never disobeyed our orders from God. We were never unruly and out of line, and you know that. You know what we did in front of you. You’ve seen our life. This is the heart of his leadership. He’s saying, “Just follow the pattern we set, just follow the model, the example.” And specifically what do you mean, Paul? Verse 8, “We did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it.” To eat bread is a Hebrew expression for food and drink, daily sustenance. They stayed, according to Acts 17:7, most likely in the house of a man named Jason. Maybe he gave them lodging there free, they would have a place on the floor where they could roll out their little mat and lie down, but they didn’t eat at his expense. They paid for their food. Paying for their food meant that they had to work, and they had to earn their own money to pay for their own food.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 11:7 and said, “I preach to you the gospel without charge.” There were occasions in his life when he chose to do this, and as I said, he doesn’t mean he never received kindness or never received money, we know he did, but there were times when he chose not to take that because there was a greater issue at stake, so he says, “We never ate anything without paying for it.” Verse 8: “But we labor” – *kopos*, to the point of sweat and exhaustion, and literally *mochthos*, struggle – “we kept working night and day.” What an unbelievable task. He’s teaching the Bible all the time, he’s working, he’s got to do this all and carry on his own sustenance and the sustenance of people with him and found a church, and it’s a night-and-day operation, and we did it so that we might not be a burden to any of you.

So he introduces the thought there, “We don’t want to be a burden. We didn’t want you to have to support us. We didn’t want you to have to give the meager amount that you might have. We toil,” he said in 1 Corinthians 4:12, “working with our hands.” In Acts 20, he said, “I covet no man’s silver or gold or clothing.” He didn’t want anything from anybody. He was willing to work, and in this case it was crucial. He said, “We didn’t want to be a burden to you, but even more than that” – look at verse 9 – “not because we don’t have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you that you might follow our example.” He knew the whole issue was a big issue, and he wanted to work to set a right example to people who had wrong view of work.

Please note verse 9: “Not because we do not have the right to this.” The truth is he had a right to being supported, he absolutely did. As an apostle and a preacher, he was really entitled to full support. I’m not going to say this in a self-serving way – I hope you know that – but this is what the Scripture says. God has ordained that those who serve Him, who labor in the Word and doctrine – 1 Timothy 5:17 – be worthy of double pay. Pay the one who ministers. In Galatians, the apostle Paul says it as clearly as he could – chapter 6 verse 6 – “Let the one who is taught the Word share all good things with him who teaches.” If you’re being taught, then you need to give and share what you have with the one who is your teacher. So as an apostle and a preacher, he had a right to full support.

Look at 1 Corinthians 9, and we'll kind of wrap it up with that text for this morning. First Corinthians chapter 9 is just a fascinating section, and he starts out with a kind of questioning rhetorically, "Am I not free?" Of course you are. "Am I not an apostle?" Of course you are. "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" Of course you have. "Are not you my work in the Lord?" Of course we are, they all, you know, imply a yes answer. Well, if all of this is true, let me talk about an issue specifically. Verse 4: "Do we not have a right to eat and drink?" Well, of course you do. "Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, be married?" Of course you do, just like the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and even Cephas, or Peter. You can be married. "Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working?" Well, no, anybody who's in ministry does. You have a right not to work. You have a right to refrain from working. Anyone who serves God, anyone who gives his life in preaching and teaching as an apostle or a preacher has the right to refrain from doing work in order to give his whole life to that. Yes, you have a right to that.

In verse 7, he says, "Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense?" The answer is nobody. Nobody serves as a soldier at his own expense, the government pays him. "Who plants a vineyard and doesn't eat the fruit of it?" Nobody. If you're going to plant the vineyard, it's so that you can have the benefit. "Who tends a flock and doesn't use the milk of the flock?" No one.

"Now, I'm not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I? Doesn't the law also say these things? Doesn't God also say this? Isn't it written in the law of Moses, you shall not muzzle the ox while he's threshing?" That's a proverbial way of saying feed the one who serves. God isn't really just concerned about oxen, is He? No, He's concerned about men. When someone serves, meet his needs. Or is he speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written because the plowmen ought to plow in hope and the thresher to thresh in hope of sharing the crop. I mean we pour our life into you and we minister and we teach and we nurture you and we expect in hope to be supported.

Verse 11: "If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we should reap material things from you? If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we didn't use this right." Isn't that interesting? All of this to say, "I have the right," and then he says, "But we didn't use it. We voluntarily forego that right in your case so that we may not cause a hindrance to the gospel."

Verse 14 sums it up. "The Lord directed that those who proclaim the gospel get their living from the gospel, but I have used none of these things. I have a right, I just don't choose to use it in your case because there's another issue at stake. I don't want people accusing me of being in it for the money, and in the case of the Thessalonians, I want to set an example to you of a proper view of work." Can you imagine what a model this was? Here were some of these Thessalonians saying, "If you're really spiritual, if you're really a free man, then you do the lofty things." Here comes the apostle Paul, the brightest intellectual of all of them, the spiritual man of all spiritual men, the godliest man, the wisest

man, erudite, educated, philosopher par excellence, theologian without peer, the man with the most acute mind, the greatest sense of reality – and what does he do? He makes tents. Puts them to shame.

First compulsion, disfellowship; second compulsion, example. Save the rest for next time.

Father, we thank You this morning for Your Word to us and what a reminder it is of the wonderful responsibilities that You give us in our work to glorify You. May we see it as You see it, and may we work gladly as a part of a creation mandate. More than that, a re-creation mandate as Christians doing everything we do not to please men but to please the Lord Jesus Christ. Doing what we do as a way to glorify You, to put our skills on display, the things You've given us by Your creative power. Doing what we do as a way to fulfill our life and benefit our family and the world around us. Doing what we do as a means of keeping us apart from idleness, which leads to sin. Give us back the dignity of work, give us back the honor of that creative intention when You put man in the garden to cultivate and till it and to rule it. May we work six days and may the fruit of our labor be pleasing to You that we might enjoy the rest of days like this. For Christ's sake, amen.

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