

We've all either heard it, said it, or wanted to say it; "That's it; I quit!" In fact, that idea has been so commonplace in the last few years it's been designated the Great Resignation. While businesses search for workers, workers leave citing, among other reasons, low pay, lack of opportunity, or even just feeling disrespected. Of course, this isn't exactly a new phenomenon. The struggle of the workingman has been an object of literature, stage, and music for quite some time. We need to remember, however, that work itself is not bad. God instituted work in the Garden of Eden before the fall when he commanded Adam to tend, or work, the garden. It wasn't until after the fall that work became something that would be a struggle associated with toil and "the sweat of the brow." Our passage today, though, is not so much about the goodness of work as it is the necessity and duty to work as part of the Christian life and the dangers that come from not doing so. There have been many, many proverbs, both biblical and secular, about work that contrast the goodness and benefit of work with the dangers of laziness. In fact, the title of this sermon is a Dutch proverb I stumbled across during my preparation. So, here we are, looking at a passage about work from the first century and trying to figure out the implications for our lives today. It's not lost on me either that I'm tasked with teaching this passage to an audience with a number of retired!

Before we jump into the passage let's take a brief moment to look back in history to the time of the Reformation to give us a little context for how we handle the implications of this passage in our culture. In the time leading up to the reformation there was a dividing line between the clergy; priests, bishops, cardinals, and such; and everyone else. It was a division that saw any work outside the church as "profane." In today's terms it would be a contrast between sacred work and secular work that views secular work as having no ability to glorify God or be used in the building of His kingdom. The reformers would have none of that, noting that the priesthood of all believers means that every vocation is equal before God in its ability to be used to glorify him and build his kingdom. Thus, the notion of the Protestant work ethic was born and the duty of all Christians to work hard at the work to which God has called them was rediscovered. Though this idea focuses on Christians it bled over into Western culture at large. For many of us the idea of the hard-working person is something we've come to expect from everyone in our culture, but we do not remember the origins of that idea. For that reason, it is important for us to pause here and note that Paul's instructions are to believers, and, while beneficial to everyone, they are not given as commands to unbelievers. It is part of God's moral law which is required of all people, but in this passage Paul is writing specifically to believers. Though it is appropriate for us to advocate the benefits of hard work to everyone, it would be wrong for us to hold these instructions over the heads of unbelievers as prescriptive, especially since they have to do with the effects of idleness on the church. Let's look at our passage.

[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,

2 Thessalonians 3:6-12

Much talk, little work.

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. [2Th 3:6-12 ESV]

So, what was going on in the church in Thessalonica that was requiring Paul's attention to this matter? There is various thought as to why people were not working, and Paul does not explicitly tell us. Some believe that the confusion over the return of Jesus had led some to stop working because either His return was imminent so that there was no need to work or it had already happened so that work was stopped out of a despair from missing it. Another view is related to the possibility that 2 Thessalonians was written in 52 AD. It surmises that some people who had not been able to work due to a famine in 51 AD had become dependent on the charity of the church and not returned to work. Another view related to that one is that people were just taking advantage of the charity of the church regardless of the effects of the famine. The final view is related to a very common occurrence in Roman culture at that time known as Roman patronage. Paul's address of work in 1 Thessalonians can give us a clue about that. In 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 Paul writes that they should, "aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one." Patronage was a practice in Roman society where a wealthier individual would take on a client, often multiple clients, who would provide services for them in return for favor in the form of food, legal help, political influence, and other such things. If a Christian was attached as a client to a pagan patron, the patron could require that the client do things on his behalf that were contrary to the Christian faith such as make sacrifices at pagan temples or participate in pagan feasts. Paul's address in 1 Thessalonians would seem to imply that people needed to work for themselves, without dependence on others, in order to maintain a Christian witness in front of the pagan world around them. If a Christian was participating in a patronage relationship with an unbeliever that would not be possible. Regardless of the reason people were not working, it had become a problem in the church to the point that Paul believed it was again necessary to write about, and because he was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit then it is important for us as well.

Idleness is destructive to the church.

When we examine the references to idleness in the passage, as well as the arguments against it, we can see quickly that idleness is destructive to the church. When we think of idleness, we usually define it as being lazy or inactive, doing nothing. A car that is idling is sitting with the engine running going nowhere. When we key into the fact that these persons

were not working but were idle it is easy to jump to the conclusion that they were just sitting around doing nothing which would be bad enough. It is somewhat unfortunate that our modern translations have resorted to the word idleness to translate the Greek word that occurs here. The KJV and NKJV translate the word disorderly, and the NASB translates it unruly or undisciplined. The Greek word *ataktos* which occurs in verses 6 and 11 is derived from the Greek verb *atakteo* which occurs in verse 7. The meaning of the word is not so much one of inaction or laziness; that would be the Greek word *argos*. The particular meaning this word conveys is one of disorder such as soldiers who are out of ranks or a person who is deviating from the prescribed order; a person who is leading a disorderly life. There is an active nature to this particular form of idleness. So, this is more than inaction, but I think the reason we see it translated idleness is that idleness frequently leads to improper behavior. The Living Bible translates Proverbs 16:27, “*idle hands are the devil’s workshop; idle lips are his mouthpiece.*” We see this further in 1 Timothy 5:11-14 where Paul is addressing how the church should handle younger widows. In verse 13 he gives a progression from being an idler going house to house to becoming a gossip and busybody. Speaking of busybodies, that takes us right back to verse 11 of our passage where Paul says that some, “*walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.*” The Greek word translated busybody carries the same meaning we would associate with that word, someone who bustles about uselessly over trifling matters and is always inquisitive about other’s affairs. Further, when Paul in verse 8 describes the example he and the others gave he says that they always paid for the food they were given so that they would not be a burden on anyone. The picture that is created of these idle persons is someone within the fellowship of the church who refuses to work and instead mooches off of others, becoming a burden to those around him, and gets into everyone else’s business. I know that we have all known someone like that. In fact, we have all probably been someone like that to some degree at some time. The problem is a person like that is a ticking time bomb in the close fellowship of a church. They create resentment, spread rumors, and create divisions. Not only are they languishing spiritually, they are threatening the wellbeing of the church.

A corrective for idleness.

Paul addresses idleness as a large and potentially destructive problem and gives a corrective for idleness. Idleness has the potential to do so much damage that he addresses it in a tough love sort of way. In verse 6 he tells other believers to stay away from anyone that is walking in idleness. That may seem harsh, but the idea, as we see in verse 14 which Steve will cover next week, is that they be ashamed and change their behavior. He also addresses the potential for enabling behavior from others in the church. In verse 10 he reminds them of the command, “*if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.*” This was actually a common proverb in the ancient world, particularly in Jewish culture. One such form of this kind of proverb was, “Let him who would not labor before the sabbath not eat on the sabbath,” which brings to mind the necessity of the Israelites to collect two bowls of manna on the day prior to the sabbath in order to have enough to eat on the sabbath. I think it is important to point out

that a willingness to work is indicated. If someone is not able to work that is a different case. If someone is able to work then they should, otherwise they should not be provided food. It was not an unusual or unexpected idea, yet it seems that the Christian love that was present between these believers tended to them providing food when perhaps they shouldn't have and unintentionally doing more harm than good. Again, that may seem harsh, but it is vital for the spiritual health of the person and the wellbeing of the church.

Work is the Christian's defense against idleness.

If idleness is so destructive to the church, then we must ask the question of our passage, "What is the defense against idleness?" Based on our discussion about the active nature of this form of idleness we can't merely say that being active, or doing something, will prevent idleness. After all, being busy over unimportant matters is what being a busybody is, and that is definitely not portrayed as a solution. No, more specifically we can say work is the Christian's defense against idleness. This is what Paul points them to from not only his teaching but also the example he and those with him set when they were in Thessalonica. Paul had every right as an apostle and minister of the Gospel to make his living from that as he says in verse 9. He made that case quite strongly in 1 Corinthians 9:1-18, particularly verse 14 which reads, "[In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.](#)" Paul's greater concern though was that he would not be a hindrance to the Gospel and so he worked not only in Thessalonica but also in Corinth and Ephesus. As Paul and those with him worked it provided an intentional example of the importance of diligent work by which they could provide for themselves and not be a burden on others. Paul went beyond setting an example though. Paul says that those who are idle are not living in accord with the tradition received from him which means he had taught them about this very thing. The topic of the necessity of work must have been an important one when he was with them. We know this because he brought it before them again in the earlier letter in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12. We also know this because in verse 10 he reminds them of the command about working he had given them when he was with them. When all this is looked at together it seems obvious that Paul's prescription to combat idleness for both the spiritual health of individuals and the wellbeing of the church is for believers to work.

Application

God has called us to himself and saved us. He has brought us into fellowship with other believers in the church. He has given our days meaning through His work on our behalf and His sacrifice on the cross. If we are in relationship with Him through faith, then we should be working to glorify Him and expand His kingdom. Paul's prescription for believers to combat the idleness that destroys our fellowship and darkens our witness is to work but working for a living back then was very different than it is now. There was no 40-hour work week 9 to 5 concept back then. People worked often from sunup to sundown. How do we think about work then? What about the time after work and on weekends? What if you are retired? What if you are a

stay-at-home mom? (We know they actually work harder than anyone else, right?) What if you are a pastor like Steve and only work half a day per week? First, I think we need to recognize the importance of rest and relaxation. God even established the day of rest as part of the ordinary cycle of life for us. Jesus often took time alone to rest and pray. We are not designed to go nonstop, and being a workaholic is really an indication of a failure to trust God. So don't take the prescription to work to the extreme! I believe that our modern society has struck a pretty good balance between work, rest, and recreation though it is far from perfect. It is just important to remember the work aspect. What qualifies as work then? Or, maybe we should ask what qualifies as not being idle? Is a job either working for someone else or running your own business the only thing that qualifies? I think the obvious answer to that is a resounding, "No!"

First, let's think about the caretaker at home. We see the epitome of this person in the wife and mother of Proverbs 31:10-31. If you want to see the finest example of the absence of idleness, this is it, and it is all rooted in the fear of the Lord and done in the care of her family and home from feeding to clothing to wisdom in business dealings. So, if you are that person, how do you redeem that opportunity God has given you? How are you glorifying Him in your work, and how are you using that opportunity to expand His kingdom? The influence of a mother on her children for the kingdom of God is powerful. In his book, Confessions, Saint Augustine speaks of the profound influence his mother had on him in his eventual turn to faith after a rather wandering path he took through his youth.

What then if you are retired? There are a few of you here. You have spent your life working hard, and now it's your time to relax, right? Wrong! Work is still important for you, too. First, think about the parable in Luke 12:16-21 of the foolish rich man who had a bumper crop and planned to build bigger barns to store his grain so that he could have plenty of goods laid up to last him for many years. He was going to relax, eat, drink, and be merry. There's nothing inherently wrong with that, but his priorities were out of whack, and he failed to show any richness toward God. That night his soul was required of him, and he died. I'm not going to say that if you have worked hard and planned wisely you shouldn't enjoy it, but keep your priorities in order. Did you know the Bible address retirement specifically in only one location? In Numbers 8:24-26 God tells Moses how the work of the Levites in the tabernacle is to be handled from a "career" perspective. They were to begin working at 25 and retire at 50. During the time period between age 25 and 50 a big part of the job was carrying the tabernacle. As such, once they were older than 50, they were less able to perform such difficult duties, so they were to retire. However, even in their retirement they were still allowed to help their brothers by keeping guard, and there was no age restriction placed on that. I think this teaches us a couple of things. One, it is proper to determine what you do in relation to what you are physically able to. Two, there is no age limit placed on service to God. The Bible gives multiple examples of the older generation passing on knowledge and wisdom to the younger

generation. Just because you are retired doesn't mean your time cannot be redeemed in a way that glorifies God and expands His kingdom.

If you have a job that allows you to provide for yourself and your family, then that is good. If it takes more than one job to do that then you are honoring God by working to provide in that way. In either case, you are showing the world what it means to work "as unto the Lord" such that your life is a witness to God and his goodness. If you are currently not working but able and willing to and just don't know where to start, don't allow fear or shame to keep you from seeking help in getting started. It is an honorable thing to seek work and honors God as you indicate a willingness to follow his plan in faith. Another perspective which I think the Bible clearly teaches is that if God has blessed you financially in your work or retirement, part of his reason for doing so is so that you can help others who truly are in need. I call this concept "working to give" and have taught a whole lesson on it before. We actually have a way to do that in our church through the benevolence offering which we take every communion Sunday. The money that is given to the benevolence offering is separate from the general giving and used exclusively to help those in our church and community who are in need.

Finally, the entire context of this sermon is directed at Christians. If you are not a believer maybe some of this is ringing true to you, but you just can't put your finger on it. Perhaps the idea of working for something higher than just provision or personal wealth seems appealing to you. Even our best works and strongest work ethic are meaningless apart from faith in God because of the sin nature we are all born with. If you have never placed your faith in Christ and committed to following him, then you can do that. If God is impressing on you to turn to Him, do not ignore that. We have a simple way of thinking about it here. Admit that you are a sinner and unable to meet the standards of a holy and righteous God. Believe that Jesus came to earth to live the perfect life you cannot, die the death that you deserve, and was raised from the grave in victory to give you life. Then, commit to following him in obedience, even imperfectly, with your life, even your work.