

Live a Productive Life

2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

Work has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember.

I learned how to swing a hammer from my dad around the age of five or six.

I shoveled dirt, sand, and gravel. I learned how to drive a wheel barrel, which in the beginning meant having it fall over several times.

I mixed mortar, cut wood with a handsaw, and cut the grass.

When I was about 13 I got my first job where I got a paycheck, it was corn detasseling.

The summer after that I got a job as a caddy and after that I got a more full-time summer job cleaning golf clubs and picking up range balls.

When I started college I got a job cleaning industrial machines, I worked as a janitor, and then as a librarian.

In the summer I worked at a gaolie equipment manufacturer, and in my last year of school I worked in the US for a fireworks company working in a warehouse and driving a delivery truck.

When I graduated Bible College, I started my journey to become an electrician.

For two years I pastored a small church outside of London while working full time as an apprentice electrician.

Soon after getting my license I started teaching in the electrical apprenticeship program at Fanshawe College.

After about four years of that through a variety of circumstances I arrived here in 2010 and have been here ever since.

I have worked at many different jobs over the years and over that time my relationship to work has changed.

When I was very young, I had a strong dislike of work for the most part.

That changed a bit when I started getting paid. Still didn't love work, but I liked the money.

After a while I started to like certain kinds of work.

Work where I got to build and fix things.

Work were I could look and see the obvious results of what I had done.

I've gone through seasons of seeing work as a means to an end.

I've worked at jobs that I felt could not end soon enough and others that I would happily do for the rest of my life.

[I imagine if we were to go around the room and listen to people we would get a variety of different perspectives on work, but have you ever stopped to ask, "How should we think about

work as Christians?” Did you know that the Bible has a fair bit to say to us about work, about being productive as human beings? As the apostle Paul brings his letter to the Thessalonians to a close in **2Thessalonians 3:6-18** he has some important things to say to these believers and to us about living a productive life. In these verses we find some important biblical perspective on the whole area of work. These lessons apply regardless of the place you clock in and out of on a regular basis. These lessons apply whether you are a child doing chores for mom and dad, in the middle of your working years, or retired. These verses are an exhortation to us to think biblically about work for the purpose of living a productive life. The initial focus here is on those in the church who are refusing to work and Paul responds by teaching this very important lesson, that...]

Point #1 – Choosing to be unproductive is choosing to disobey the LORD. (Verses 6-8)

God made human beings to do stuff, that is an intrinsic part of our bearing His image. If we ignore that we are living in rebellion against God.

Look with me at verse 6.

The tone of this verse is non-negotiable.

He says, “We command you!”

This is more than something we would like you to do, this is something you must do.

This command is coming to them in the ‘name of our LORD Jesus’.

This is coming from the very top. The One Who made you and He has the absolute right to determine the purposes of His creatures.

The command is to ‘keep away from any brother [that is anyone who claims to know Jesus as their saviour] who is walking in idleness.’

That is someone who had made ‘idleness’ a consistent or ongoing pattern in their life.

Typically, when we think of the word ‘idle’ laziness comes to mind.

While that is certainly a factor here, commentator Gene Green points out that the original language suggests a deeper issue.

The word most literally means ‘disorderly’. In other words people are making a willful choice to live in a way that is contrary to God’s designs and it is hurting the wellbeing of the church.

In this case the willful choice is refusing to work and that is the exact opposite of what they were taught and the example Paul and his companions set for them. **(Verses 7-8)**

We know from Acts 18:3 that Paul was a tentmaker or leather worker by trade.

On more than one occasion he used that skill to earn a living when preaching the gospel in a new place so that no one would have any ground to question his motives for telling people about Jesus.

This example of tireless effort out of love for others should make the idea of doing nothing at all unthinkable.

Paul's thought here is rooted in God's commands going all the way back to the beginning of creation.

In Genesis 1 we are told that God created humanity and told Adam and Eve to fill the earth and have dominion over it.

The LORD placed Adam in the garden and told him to, 'work it and keep it.'

Work became much harder after Adam disobeyed God, but that doesn't change the fact that people were made to work at things to the glory of God which makes work a good gift from the LORD to humanity.

That is contrary to how we are conditioned to think about work in our society.

I think it is pretty safe to say that most people prefer Friday to Monday.

Generally speaking most people don't jump for joy at the sound of their alarm going off to make it to work on time.

I get that. I've been there many times, but we need to be careful as believers to avoid having our thinking dominated by the influences of a godless society.

You don't have to love your job to work at it like you love God.

You don't have to have your dream career to see work as a gift that has been given to us for the purpose of serving others.

You don't have to work at the same job until you die.

But we should see work as a good gift that enables us to contribute to the good of the world out of love for Christ.

That is what some believers in Thessalonica were rejecting.

[Though they had the opportunity to work, they refused to do so and instead made the conscious choice to be unproductive. That is contrary to God's commands and ought to have no place in the church. That being the case the apostle takes it a step further in the next few verses. If we can see the seriousness of choosing idleness as a pattern of life, if we can see that it is actually a bad thing for people to live in disobedience to the LORD, then we will also see that...]

Point #2 – God’s people must refuse to enable an unproductive life. (Verses 9-11)

The Bible is incredibly clear about being generous and kind to people in need, but if that turns into unhealthy dependency it is no longer kindness but a participation is rebellion against the LORD, and we should have no part in that.

Paul explains the decision to ‘toil day and night’ a bit further in verse 9.

Working essentially two full-time jobs one as a leather worker and one as a preacher was a temporary deal.

This was not the Apostle’s continual practice and once churches were established he counselled that qualified men be set apart to the task of preaching and teaching the Word to build up the church.

He knew full well working day and night was not sustainable, but he pushed the limits of his physical ability for a short time in the early days of the church for the sake of setting a strong example of working hard for the benefit of others.

He wanted these believers to know that his motives were good and came from a place of seeking their highest good.

He wanted them to see that believers should be seeking to be contributors rather than consumers.

That becomes crystal clear in **verse 10.**

I imagine that likely sounds a little harsh and cold hearted to us.

How do we square this with the numerous commands to love people and care for those in need?

Well we have to remember the biblical definition of love. To truly love someone is to desire their highest good.

How can we say we care about someone’s highest good while at the same time enabling them to live in disobedience to God’s commands?

The person who is to be refused food here is the one who is ‘not willing to work’.

They have the ability, they have the opportunity, but they are making a deliberated choice to do nothing and instead are trying to take advantage of the kindness of their fellow believers.

If the church gives them food they are helping them to live in disobedience to God’s commands and His design.

Additionally they are diminishing the church’s ability to help those truly in need.

The problem goes even deeper than physical resources like food according to verse 11.

The word translated ‘busybodies’ here means to meddle in affairs not your own or to be preoccupied with unimportant things.

These are the unhelpful complainers and critics. Those who are wise in their own eyes but are in reality fools.

They are self-entitled, demanding, and often thankless.

You see when people refuse to live in obedience to the LORD in a basic area of life like work, it often leads to disobedience in other areas of the life as well.

Enabling that is not good for them and it is certainly not good for the church or for society in general.

[Imagine being on a boat with a bunch of other people and one guy is drilling holes in the bottom of the boat. What is the loving thing to do there? Take away the drill and tie him up or give him a couple of fully charged batteries for his drill? Enabling someone who calls themselves a Christian to live an unproductive life and taking advantage of others is like helping them drill holes in the bottom of a boat. The LORD wants something better for His people. That is what we are pointed to in the next portion of this passage. Instead of enabling and unproductive life we can see here that...]

Point #3 – God’s people must encourage one another in doing what is right. (Verses 12-15)

If we care about each other at all, and we should care about each other deeply, then we need to be pointing each other towards obedience to what the LORD commands.

Verse 12 directly addresses those who are ‘walking in idleness.’

This is what we might call a spiritual kick in the pants.

To everyone kicking up their feet with the expectation of other people meeting your needs, get off the couch turn off the video games and go do something useful in order to earn a living.

It may mean doing something you would rather avoid doing.

It may mean humbling yourself to do something you had previously felt was beneath you, but if we are thinking biblically about it then we would see that the type of job that we work at is a secondary issue.

There is no morally good job that is beneath any believer and every morally good job can be worked at in a way that honours Christ.

That can certainly be hard at times which is why I think he writes this in **verse 13**.

He turns his attention to those believers who are seeking to be productive in their lives and he says ‘don’t grow weary.’

How easy would it be to see those indulging in idleness and say, “This working hard business is silly I’m going to start doing what they are doing”?

[That is pretty basic to our human nature. I use to see it all the time back when I worked in construction. One guy got away with slacking off and others followed that example, but it usually ended poorly because when things got a bit slower those guys were the first out the door. We see it in society, the more people become dependent on government the less sustainable things become until the whole thing crashes and everyone suffers.]

Believers must be different, we must resist the temptation towards idleness and instead do this **verses 14-15**.

Again this probably strikes us as fairly harsh. Multiple commentators think this is something a bit less than full church discipline.

Robert Thomas, for example, believes this means being excluded from communion, potlucks, and any kind of material assistance.

Notice the goal here is to ‘warn as a brother’ rather than treat them as an enemy.

The idea being that those walking in idleness would feel the weight of their shameful choices and instead embrace the gift of labouring at something out of love for Jesus and others.

The goal here is restoration and encouragement because that is what is needed.

[That is true in every area of our lives. Sometimes we need someone to give us a spiritual kick in the pants so that we will be motivated to do what is right. I ask you brothers and sisters, do we love each other enough to tell one another the truth? Do we love Jesus enough to listen to those who confront us in our sin? I hope so because if we want to live productive lives we need to encourage each other towards what is right. That brings us to our last lesson of this passage. Having clearly spoken to us about the importance of work and the sin of idleness, the book comes to a close with some important perspective. Work by itself is not enough, we are reminded here that...]

Point #4 – People need Christ to live a truly productive life. (Verses 16-18)

Working for the sake of work misses the mark by a wide margin in terms of fulfilling what we were designed to be and do. Working from a place of eternal redemption in Jesus, however, makes everything we do worthwhile.

Once again Paul turns to prayer for these believers.

He offers a prayer in verse 16, another in verse 18, and he puts a brief but important remark in between.

Let’s look at the prayer portion of these verses first. **(Verses 16&18)**

In verse 16 he prays that Jesus would grant peace ‘at all times in every way’.

Matthew Henry describes this as ‘...all manner of prosperity...peace with God, peace with people, and peace of mind.’

Brothers and sisters you can't get that from a job.
Just as it is possible to live in idleness it is also possible
to make work into an idol.

If I work hard enough then I will be secure. The truth is no matter how much we have it can all be taken away in the blink of an eye.

The pursuit of wealth has made a dumpster fire of many homes.

For some people, their job becomes their identity. They primarily think of themselves in terms of what they do for a living.

That is a road filled with despair and discouragement because no matter how successful you may be at a particular job it will never be enough to satisfy your soul.

If you doubt that take some time to read the book of Ecclesiastes.

If work is an end in itself it is meaningless, you need the peace and presence of Christ to be truly productive.

In verse 18 he prays again for the grace of Christ to be with these believers.

No matter how much we work and do good things, we will never be in less need of the grace of God in Christ.

Living a productive life is a life full of work that is proceeding from grace.

It is impossible otherwise.

[I bet we have a whole bunch of strong kids here this morning. How many kids here could carry around a rock in their backpack that weighs 10lbs? What about 20lbs? How about 50lbs? How many of you would carry around a rock that weighs 10000lbs? Nobody can and you will only get frustrated and hurt if you try. What if instead you had a giant tractor that could lift it? Not only could the rock be moved you might even have fun driving the tractor.]

God's grace in Christ is like the giant tractor, it makes obeying God possible and even joyful.

Whatever we do brothers and sisters we need Christ and that is why Paul prays the way he does at the end of this letter.

In between the prayers he writes this in **verse 17**.

At first this might seem out of place, but if we understand the reason why he is doing this it makes sense.

By this time in Paul ministry there were already people trying to steer this church and others in the wrong direction by writing letters in his name.

What he is doing here is like putting an official stamp on the letter so that they will know it is genuine.

It is one of the reasons among many we can trust our bibles.

The early church went to great lengths to protect and preserve the teaching of the apostles who were specifically set apart directly by Jesus lay the theological foundation for the church.

You see the commands that are given to us here about living a productive life, what is written to us about the end times and the hope of the church in this letter all come with the authority of Jesus Himself.

Brothers and sisters what we have here is more than the words of Paul what we have here is the word of Christ to the church throughout every age.

As we await His return, He wants us to see the goodness of living a productive life.

If we choose otherwise we are choosing to disobey the LORD.

If we have any love for God we must resist that in our own life and we also must refuse to enable it in the lives of others.

Instead of enabling idleness we need to encourage each other in doing what is right and do this in the peace and grace of Christ.

If we do that, we will live a productive life and that could change the world.