

Hope's Hard Work

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- [0 : 0 0] Good afternoon and welcome to our lunchtime Bible talk. Today we'll be finishing our study on Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians.
- Before we turn to read that, can I just point out the Christmas flyer that's on your seat. Please do have a look at that and work out maybe which service you might be able to prayerfully invite someone along to.
- Our carol services are a great opportunity to bring someone along, a great evangelistic opportunity to bring someone along and hear a very clear gospel message and sing some carols as many people love to do.
- So have a look at that and see what you might be able to do. Before we have our reading, let's pray. Father, we thank you that yet again we can join together on a Wednesday.
- And hear you speak to us through your word. We pray that you would help us to leave behind all the stresses and strains that might be weighing us down now.
- [1 : 0 6] And be able to spend this time listening and being prepared to respond with all of our hearts to what you've said to us in your word. Be with us for this half hour we pray in Jesus name.
- Amen. Amen. Please turn up in your Bibles. Two Thessalonians again. We're on chapter 3 this week verses 6 to 15 as we finish off.
- So that's two Thessalonians chapter 3. And we'll be reading verses 6 to 15. That's page 990 in the church visitors Bibles. Beginning at verse 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. Or that word could also be disorder.
- And not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us because we were not idle when we were with you. Nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it.
- [2 : 1 1] But with toil and labor we worked night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right. But to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.
- For even when we were with you we would give you this command. If anyone is not willing to work let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness.
- Not busy at work but busy bodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly. And to earn their own living.
- As for you brothers do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter. Take note of that person. And have nothing to do with him that he may be ashamed.
- Do not regard him as an enemy. But warn him as a brother. Amen. This is God's word. It's often much easier for us to hear and believe a compliment than a criticism.

[3 : 18] Even if it isn't accurate. That is in part at least because it's more attractive to hear positive things than criticisms. A compliment will make you smile. Perhaps even feel a few inches taller.

And we want that feeling more. Whereas a criticism can linger for days. Weeks. And it can distress us. It's easier to learn to brush those off and not listen.

When it comes to believing doctrines or sayings or things about the Christian faith that are not quite right. Then a large part of the reason why we believe him is because there's something attractive in them.

Our hearts in their fallen state and still wrestling with sin cling on to what sounds good. So far we've seen that for the Thessalonian church the belief that Jesus has already returned would have caused upset.

Their persecution had continued so if Jesus had already returned it would have felt that they'd been robbed of their hope. Why are we still suffering? They might have asked.

[4 : 23] You might ask then where is the attraction in this error? Why might people be tempted to believe it? Well that's what we're about to see in chapter 3.

When Paul was writing it would seem that it wasn't a widespread belief. But it was certainly one that could take hold if unaddressed. So what was this presenting issue? We see it in verses 11 and 12.

The issue was an absent work ethic. Verse 6. Paul says that there were some who were not living or walking in accord with what Paul had taught them. There were some who were not living gospel lives in this church.

In what way? Verse 11. Some of them were not busy at work. Some of them were not working to earn their own living. And more than that, verse 11.

They weren't just not busy at work. They were busy bodies. Now busy bodies is an uncommon word in the New Testament. In fact the only other time that we come across it is about false teachers.

[5 : 30] Gossips. Who move about from house to house. Spreading confusion. And so perhaps in this case they are helping to spread the rumor that we came across in chapter 2.

They're busy bodies. Confusing people about Christ's return. This is not only a case that some are lazy and doing nothing. But rather their behavior is showing a fundamental misunderstanding of the truth.

So Paul is clear. Those who do love Jesus. Those who know the truth will. Verse 12. Quietly and persistently. Get on with their work.

That's what the normal life looks like for someone who's clear about Jesus' return. It's not wacky predictions of dates and all those things. It's getting on with the normal day-to-day life.

The repeating word in this passage that helps us get to grips with the main issue is idleness. It comes up three times. Verse 6. Verse 7.

[6 : 30] And verse 11. But perhaps it's more helpfully translated in the King James Version. Where it says disorder. Some in the church are walking in disorder. It's more than laziness.

It's denying the gospel lifestyle itself. But it's seen most clearly in this issue of work. We know that work is a good thing. It was part of creation from the very beginning.

When God was working to create the world, he was bringing order to disorder. He was bringing order to chaos. We read that in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

And then immediately we read that the earth was without form and void. Until God's creative work brought order. Then as part of the ordering of creation, man was put into the garden to work it and keep it.

Man was given dominion over the earth to fill it and subdue it. So from the very beginning, order was a big deal. And work was a big part of that. You see, work is not a result of the fall.

[7 : 34] Rather, the fall caused work to be frustrating and hard. God's plan in the beginning included creating order. And so work was a big part of that.

And so work is part of honoring God and living out his purposes. However, back in Thessalonica, this has all gone wrong. Because they're living in disorder.

And verse 6, they're not living in accord with Paul's traditions. We've seen throughout this letter that they had a clock malfunction. Their calendars right of sync. They thought that Christ had already come.

And one of the things that they seem to have concluded from this is that he has brought the eternal Sabbath rest for now. New creation now. So rest now, not work.

But in who we know that work is good and right. It is orderly. It naturally flows out of understanding the gospel. It is the life that we live in the day-to-day as we look forward to the new creation that's to come.

[8 : 41] This life now for the Christian is one that ought to be characterized by order. By activity. Not disorder. Not laziness. When there's an opportunity to work and an ability to work, then that's to be embraced, says Paul.

God designed things that way. Our clocks are malfunctioning if we do not want to be busy at work in the present. When I was young, I got up and got ready for school one morning and headed off, only to arrive at the school gate and realize that it was locked.

Utterly baffled, I called my mum. And my brother answered the phone with the words, Happy April Fool's Day. For I was up an hour earlier that day. In fact, he'd gotten me with a cracker.

My clock had been tampered with. Every clock in the house had been shifted. And so I was standing at the school gate an hour early. Well, if we have a malfunctioning clock in our Christian lives, if we think that Jesus has already returned, if we claim for now what isn't for now, then we will miss out entirely on our daily Christian purpose.

And that is not glorifying Jesus. That would not be clinging on to our wonderful hope of Christ's return. Our future hope says it's okay to arrive in heaven tired.

[10 : 09] There will be eternal rest for us there. Work has always been part of our purpose, part of what it is to be human. For we know that Christ has rescued us for good works that he's prepared in advance for us to do.

We know that it is right to do what is commanded. It's right to live in a way that is in accord with the gospel tradition. And doing that glorifies Jesus in our bodies.

As chapter 1 verse 12 says, our day-to-day occupation is a big part of that. Now please don't misunderstand. If you're here and you're unable to work because of your health, whether that be mental or physical or other, or because of the need to care for someone else who's unable to work, then that doesn't mean that you're rejecting Jesus or anything like that.

But it is right to have a regular occupation, a purpose, something that we get out of bed each day for, that we do to the glory of God. Is it raising a family?

Is it caring and loving grandkids and bringing them up to love Jesus? Is it using our retirement to serve at church, to serve the gospel? Is it using our spare time to meet with people, to share the gospel with them, to encourage them over a cup of coffee?

[11 : 27] For some, it will be working hard at a nine-to-five job, being diligent, having integrity, loving our colleagues, and earning money to live and to give to church.

But this life lived in creation is for getting on with work. This life now is for getting on with work in order to bring glory to Jesus.

And Paul goes on to show us more of what that looks like. Verses 7 to 10 and verse 13, he says, the apostles worked for our example. Paul's hard work is a model for the Christian life in this age of the now and not yet.

In verse 6, Paul ties not working with being opposed to what he has taught. And he goes on further to say in verse 7, you knew to imitate us.

What they were to imitate was Paul's busyness in doing good. When he was with them, he didn't just preach, as was his role as an apostle. But verse 9, Paul and his missionary team could have insisted on their right to be looked after materially by the Thessalonians.

[12 : 40] After all, the laborer deserves his wages. However, Paul is flexible with his rights. He wouldn't want the cause of the gospel to be harmed by money. That isn't his main concern.

It seems that some in Thessalonica were taking advantage of the church family and expecting the church to provide for them. This is a church that we know is renowned for its love. Paul didn't want his right of support to be twisted and used to encourage that kind of behavior.

So on top of his preaching, he worked to care for his own needs as well. He didn't want people to think that because he could live off the church, they could too. That's a twisting of what is true.

So Paul set the example of being busy at work, working hard. And he also goes on to say, verse 10, for those who are unwilling to work, let them not eat.

Notice he doesn't say it's unable to work. He isn't correcting ability, but desire. For those who are unwilling to work, for those who don't want to, those who are happy to live off and burden others, Paul says, let them go hungry.

[13 : 53] Taking advantage of the church's love is not glorifying Jesus. It's not keeping to what Paul taught. Paul didn't want anyone to claim they were mimicking him by wrongly living off the generosity of the church.

YouTube is a great thing to find out how to do things, whether it be finding videos on how to replace batteries and electronic devices, how to fix the air conditioning in your car, how to unblock a drain, you name it, there's a video there and you can find out how to do it.

Instruction manuals are a thing of the past. It's much easier to see someone else doing something in front of you and then copy them. Well, that's what we have here from Paul.

Paul has left an example for us and he goes on to expand that example in verse 13. As for you, brothers, don't grow weary in doing good.

Paul worked harder amongst this church so that they could learn through him to persist with good works. Having the promise of the gospel ought to only strengthen our desire to serve God with all of our lives.

[15 : 06] The sure we are of the hope of Christ's return, the more we can go above and beyond like Paul in serving Christ. It's okay to arrive in heaven tired because we'll arrive there, we will arrive there for faithful to Jesus and then there will be eternal rest.

So that means in following Paul and living gospel lives now and letting Christ's return shape our future, we don't want to err on the side of inactivity. It is good and right to be busy doing good things.

So when it comes to serving at church, how much is too much? Well, that will vary. Too much will be making ourselves unwell. Too much will be at a level that's unsustainable.

But equally, it's okay to have spells where we're tired, where we do have a lot on, where we do have to work particularly hard for a time, where maybe our regular nights with our friends or with people we like to catch up with has to go by the wayside so we can help run a Christianity Explored course.

With our jobs, of course we want to work hard at Honours God to be good employees. It even acts as a witness to colleagues if they see us being particularly diligent. So maybe we aren't the last person in and the first person out of the office, or we're careful to not be known as a lazy employee.

[16 : 34] We don't want to be known as a committed Christian, eager to serve at church, but a poor employee. That could hinder our witness. Or maybe the good work is your spouse is particularly busy and you have more to do to care for your family.

That's okay. It honours Jesus to do it. Maybe you don't get to watch the football or the golf. Maybe you don't get to watch the Great British Bake Off this week. Instead, you help your spouse washing the dishes, putting the kids to bed, making the dinner so that they can also work hard at doing good.

With all of these applications, we need to remember that work isn't the most important thing. The goal is not to work hard in our employment to be a success at all costs.

We need to balance that with other responsibilities too. Or we also need to know that our patterns of life need to be sustainable. Having enough rest so that we can actually keep going. Not tiring ourselves out to the point that there's no return.

But we must also beware of thinking that we need lots of rest now. That's a new creation thing. Like Paul, we can pour out this life, working particularly hard for a time to enhance the cause of the gospel.

[17 : 55] We can arrive in heaven tired. That's okay. Because when we get there, we will have eternal rest. So verse 13, Paul says, do not grow weary of doing good.

That's what we're here for in the day to day. And finally, Paul says, avoid the work shy enthusiasts. Verses 6, and then 14 to 15.

Avoid the work shy enthusiasts. He says that for the good of the whole church. We've seen that there was a real problem and it could grow to be an all-encompassing one.

Paul says, verse 6, keep away from them. Why? Well, because we know that bad company corrupts good character. If the problem is allowed to fester away, then like a fruit bowl with a rotten apple in it, the worm can go from apple to apple, corrupting them all.

If left alone, this problem could spread to the whole church. They seem to have been misled about the future together already. And if others are acting like this and trying to spread it like busybodies, then it could take hold in the whole church.

[19 : 07] Hard work now exalts the risen and returning Jesus. So don't let anyone distract you from getting on with it. It's easy as a church in a church setting to look around and see others who do less than us.

And slowly, slowly we get more and more frustrated, maybe to the point that we want to down tools. Why are they not doing as much as me? Or you're on the tea and coffee route with someone and they just don't show up a couple of times and you're tempted to do the same the next time.

All it would take for a major problem in a church is that to happen in a few areas. People start clubbing together and complaining, then suddenly there could be a crisis. Or maybe even you'll just have a few people not showing up to do a duty and the whole ministry is hindered because the doors aren't open, the coffee hasn't been made, there's no kids' work this week.

So we must be careful to not be influenced by others' bad behavior. That's Paul's point there. But he isn't finished. He goes on to say, again, have nothing to do with them in verse 14.

If they don't listen to the instructions to get on with work, if they don't listen to what he said about keeping going with doing good, he says, take a note of them and have nothing to do with them.

[20 : 30] Only this time he adds, so that they may be ashamed. The reason behind the avoidance is the good of the whole church, both to not let it spread, but also to make it clear to offenders that they are offending.

The shame is done in the context of verse 15. Paul says, remember, they're brothers, they're not enemies. So this is a measure of church discipline. It's restorative.

We want to be getting on with good works together as a church and that might mean that we do have to challenge people about their commitment. But instead of us thinking, who can I challenge that's not doing very much?

Perhaps we ought to first think, how might I respond to that tap on the shoulder? Would that be the final kneel in the coffin of me serving somewhere? Would that be me finally growing weary of doing good?

It's always better to think first how we would respond to the challenge before challenging someone else. The truth is, with all this good work, that we will never be able to exhaust the possibilities of doing good.

[21 : 42] We could always be better employees. We could always serve the gospel in more ways. These things are limitless. But Paul doesn't want us to despair.

Rather, he wants us to see the certain return of Christ, the ultimate event that will make everything we do for Jesus in this life worth it. And with the strength that he gives through that, with the strength that he gives through his gospel promises, he wants us to not grow weary of doing good.

So for each person, each day, that will look different. But waking up each morning and thinking, what can I do today to glorify Jesus? It's a good thing to ask.

Every day brings the opportunity to do it. So let's invest in that because we know we have a wonderful future that will make it all worth it.

We can live to glorify Jesus now because the day is coming when we will share in all of his glory and on that day we will have eternal rest.

[22 : 49] So it will be okay to arrive tired out, having worked hard. We can live to glorify Jesus now because the day is coming when we will share in all of his glory and it will be worth it.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you have given us a great salvation, a great hope, and many and great blessings through the Lord Jesus.

Keep us clinging to these, hoping in these, trusting in these that we might pour out our lives to serve you so that each day we'll long to do what will honor you.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.