

In the April 2016 issue of *The Economist*, Ryan Avent wrote an article entitled, “Why Do We Work So Hard?” He writes extensively about work, but he’s not writing about the kind of work Paul has in mind when the Apostle encourages Christians to “*never tire of doing what is good.*” In the article, Avent notes that “One of the facts of modern life is that a relatively small class of people works very long hours and earns good money for its efforts. Nearly a third of college-educated American men, for example, work more than 50 hours a week. Some professionals do twice that amount, and elite lawyers can easily work 70 hours a week, almost every week of the year.

“Work, in this context, means active, billable labor. But in reality it rarely stops. It follows us home on our smartphones, tugs at us during an evening out, or in the middle of our children’s bedtime routines. It makes permanent use of our valuable cognitive space, and chooses odd hours to pace through our thoughts, shoving aside whatever might have been there before. It colonizes our personal relationships and uses them for its own ends. It becomes our lives if we are not careful.”

Paul spends relatively little time in his second letter to Thessalonica’s Christians talking about personal Christian ethics, even though he could have addressed things like healthy relationships and the proper attitude toward those in authority, as he does in his other epistles. However, in this Sunday’s Scripture the Apostle instead focuses on the *work* that Christians do.

The daily work of Christians is a hugely relevant discussion topic, but if we want to let the Spirit lead our reflections on 2 Thessalonians 3 today, I suggest we view it through the lens of verse 13: “*As for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.*” The “work” to which Paul summons the Thessalonians throughout chapter 3 is well-doing. The verb the NIV translated as “*doing what is good*” is *kalopoiountes* and verse 13 is the only time in all of Scripture where this particular verb is used. So, translators infer the word’s English meaning from its combination of two root words, “good” and “do”. Literally it means something like, “living virtuously.” In this part of his letter Paul asserts that at least some of “*doing what is good*” involves how the Thessalonian Christians go about their everyday work. The commitment to *living virtuously* (not *speaking* virtuously, because words are cheap); living virtuously impacts whether or not they do daily work, whether they’re “idle” (6, 7, 11), or whether they work hard.

The Apostle grieves that some Thessalonian Christians have chosen the practice of being “idle,” literally, “idly walking.” Jennifer Wyant calls this word “a strange little adverb” (workingpreacher.org/commentaries/2-thessalonians-3) It only appears in 2 Thessalonians 3:6 and 10. Wyant helpfully notes, “Outside of the New Testament, this word means

‘disorderly or irresponsibly’ and is often found within the context of battle imagery, of men not being ready at their post or not ready for the fight because of their disorder.” This suggests that Paul is talking to idle Thessalonian Christians who are acting irresponsibly. It reminds me of what my great aunt who lived in Andover, Ohio used to say, “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.”

Some biblical scholars suggest that the idle Thessalonian Christians assumed they didn’t have to work because Jesus was coming soon—very soon. Others point to Paul’s reference in verse 11 to “busybodies” as implying that some of these Christians were so busy meddling in other peoples’ lives that they had neither time nor energy left to do their daily work. In either case, those whose idleness Paul criticizes in this passage aren’t simply lazy or somehow unable to work. They are, instead, *unwilling* to work in ways that benefit the wider community. They “work” at creating chaos in their community.

It’s not too difficult to reconstruct a scenario in which people had become so convinced that Christ was about to return soon, or in some way had already returned, that they refused to work. Why work to earn a living when you are certain there is no tomorrow on this earth? It’s a short step from that position to telling everyone else how to run their lives. Minding everyone else’s business gets mistakenly confused with a sense of calling. From that point on, conflict is inevitable as does noisy disruption of the faith community and further weakening of the fellowship.

Throughout his epistles Paul often chooses to focus on actions that harm the individual Christian, but also the broader community. In inviting his Thessalonian brothers and sisters in Christ to “*settle down and earn the food they eat*” (v. 12), Paul doesn’t just summon them to a more productive way of living. He also uses his own work in Thessalonica as an example. The Apostle reminds them that when Timothy and he ministered there, they weren’t idle. They didn’t mooch from those with whom they stayed. They paid for their own food.

Even though Paul and Timothy were religious teachers who had the right to expect the Thessalonian Christians to support them, the apostle insists they “*worked night and day*” so that they wouldn’t be “*a burden to any of you.*” He did this, Paul adds in verse 9, in order to make themselves a “model” for Thessalonian Christians to imitate. Paul seems to understand that Christian discipleship is in some ways as much “caught” as it is “taught.” Christian leaders don’t just *teach* what it means to follow Jesus. We also *demonstrate* what it means to follow him. I sense that when Paul and Timothy were with the Thessalonians, they were conscious of modeling a kind of lifestyle that sought to *bless* rather than *burden* the Thessalonians.

Yet, it's difficult to read Paul's call to imitate the apostles' faithful work while ignoring the penalty he seems to impose on the Thessalonians who don't imitate them. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, he "*commands*" his Christian brothers and sisters to "*to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive.*" "Disruptive" defines the type of idleness they were seeing. As if that's not difficult enough to understand, he adds in verse 10: "*The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.*" Most of us preachers admit that these are problematic verses to reconcile with Jesus' teachings. Again, perhaps we should remember the kind of idleness Paul especially condemns in verse 11—that which arises from being a "busybody." The Apostle admits that Christian discipleship is as much "caught" as "taught." So, might he be suggesting that disobedience can also be "caught"? That by staying too close to people who meddle in others' affairs, the Thessalonians make themselves vulnerable to becoming busybodies? What's more, might it be that by insisting that those who don't work don't eat (v. 10), Paul is challenging these Christians to not *enable* busybodies to further meddle in the community's life? Might the Apostle be suggesting that Christians who feed meddlers are actually encouraging them to do further harm to the community?

It seems critically important to me that Paul ends this Sunday's reading by stating, "*And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good*" (v. 13). This, I believe, is the capstone to this letter—just three words in the original Greek (*me enkakesete kalopoiontes*) as opposed to the seven words in English, and loaded with important instructions.

So, what exactly is the Apostle challenging the Thessalonian Christians to do in "*doing what is good*"? Certainly, their daily work. Paul calls his readers to continue to do what is right so that they can care for both those they love and those who struggle to support themselves. He invites Thessalonica's Christians to do their work so well that they're not an unnecessary burden to their church.

Doing what is good encompasses more than just our daily work. Biblical scholar Frank Crouch suggests that the Apostle is basically saying, "Don't get tired of doing what is good. Don't get sick of doing good. Keep on keeping on in doing good things. Never stop lifting up those around you if you can. Don't ever give up on doing good. Do whatever good you can, whenever you can, wherever you can, in whatever ways you can—even if you don't have to." Paul summons readers of every time and place to do everything we do well. Jesus' friends are to do everything we can, not to save ourselves, or in some abstruse way to help God save us, but so we may bring glory to God and bless our neighbors.

Public relations were alive and well back in 1919 when The Salvation Army adopted its four word slogan that has been spoken, printed, repeated, and debated for 103 years. Have you ever seen it on a sign next to one of those red kettles? It's: *Doing the most good!*

Have you also noticed there are a lot of people who don't really like Paul's teaching? You may be one of them. If so, you may have a hard time digesting part of today's passage, especially the parts about steering clear of those who are disruptive; and if you don't work, you don't eat. I would agree Paul can be a bitter pill to swallow, but if we only give him a chance, we'll find he's not as mean-spirited as we may think. His concern is to put a stop to the growing turmoil and division in Thessalonica, a vital mission outpost in Macedonia. He shows concern for individual members, but his major concern is for the overall health of the church. He wants to point them toward a lasting truth—that the secret of a life well spent is to stay focused on what is good and do your part, however small it is; to further the kingdom. Remember that Jesus said, *“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”* (Matthew 6:33).

As we get to the end of our passage today in verses 14-15, we find a more helpful way to explain what it means to continue to do right even toward people who are idle. *“Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter,”* Paul writes. *“Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed.”* That command is, of course, consistent with his call to keep away from Christians who are idle and disruptive in verse 6. But then, the Apostle adds, *“Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer.”* While some Christians may, in fact, be “idle,” Paul reminds Jesus' followers that they aren't enemies of God's people. To do what is right is to view and treat even those who are idle as God's eternally loved children who are fellow believers in the faith.

In Thessalonians, Paul's main concern is for the health and well-being of the community of faith. Nevertheless, chapter 3 can be a tough message to hear and apply for those of us who have always emphasized God's unconditional love as the basis of genuine Christian community. Unconditional love is often expressed as “I love you, no matter what.” But Paul calls the Thessalonians to consider taking action to disassociate from some members of the community. Christian love, then, cannot mean the limitless toleration of destructive behaviors.

And we know how very urgent this situation is for Paul. He introduces this entire discussion in verse 1: *“Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him...”* (2:1). No matter how contentious or how discouraging life may be: *Never tire of doing what is good!* And there's no better time to begin than the present! Amen.