

WORK: BURDEN OR OPPORTUNITY?



2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

Eleventh Message

Bernard Bell

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SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

Many of us have been shocked by the recent report on Ravi Zacharias, revealing the dissonance between his public life and his private life and the efforts he made to keep these two realms separate. In public he presented a well-ordered mind able to proclaim a robust apologetic for the Christian faith. But his private life was disordered and at odds with his public persona.

I am reminded of Gordon MacDonald whose book *Ordering Your Private World* (1984) was published at about the same time that his own private world was falling into disorder. When this came to light a few years later, he immediately confessed and took ownership. This led to a second book *Rebuilding Your Broken World* (1988) and a fruitful ministry to broken-world people like himself.

Being a Christian is not just about what we say in public; it's how we live in private. Christianity is not just a set of beliefs but a way of life. In terms of beliefs, we respond to the gospel, accepting as good news the declaration of what God has done in Christ. We then enter the lifelong journey of growing in understanding about this news: faith seeking understanding, not understanding seeking faith. When we give our allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord we begin the lifelong journey of learning how to live differently, as we are conformed into likeness to Christ. Coming to faith is not the end of a journey but the beginning of one in both understanding and lifestyle. In the individualistic West we tend to think of this journey as solitary: me and God. But when we follow Christ we enter a community—the Beloved Community I talked about last week. We need to learn not only how we live as individual Jesus followers but also how we live within a community of Jesus followers. This can be difficult.

The Thessalonian church was a young church learning how to live differently. It's clear that Paul loved this church: he calls them his beloved. And he was pleased with how they were living, in relation to both God and one another. In his first letter he wrote,

we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus... Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more. (1 Thess 4:1-2, 9-10 NIV)

So the Christians were doing well, living a new lifestyle and loving one another. Paul just has to urge them to do so more and more. He gives them an attaboy: well done, keep on going.

Disorderly Christians (3:6-15)

But not all was well in the Thessalonian church. Some members were living in a way that was not harmonious with the new community ethos taught by Paul. In his second letter he issues some stern instructions on how to deal with these disruptive people.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. (2 Thess 3:6)

Paul warns about those who are “idle and disruptive.” Who are these disruptive people? They are fellow Christians. They are within the household of faith, within the Beloved Community. Yet Paul commands the believers to stay away from them. He considers them a danger to the orderly functioning of the body of Christ. The basic meaning of the word Paul uses of them (“idle and disruptive” NIV) is “disorderly,” so that's how I'm going to render it. It is the opposite of well-ordered. Paul writes that they are living in a disordered manner and not according to the tradition which they had received from Paul and his coworkers. What is this tradition they had received? Paul had both modeled a lifestyle (7-9) and given an explicit command (10). First, he reminds them about his lifestyle when he was present among them:

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. (3:7-9)

We can get a better picture of the disordered believers by looking at Paul's well-ordered life. While Paul and his coworkers lived among the Thessalonians they were not disordered (here Paul uses the verb, which NIV translates as simply “idle”). They did not behave inappropriately. More specifically, they did not eat at anyone's home without paying; they were not freeloaders sponging off new believers. Instead, they worked with their own hands, in labor and toil, night and day.

Paul explains why they chose to work. They could have pulled rank as apostles and called on the believers to support them, but he gives two reasons why they did not do so. First, so as not to impose a burden on them, the burden of their support. Second, in order to provide a model for the believers to imitate.

Paul begins and ends vv. 7-9 (a single sentence in Greek) with imitation: “you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us...we worked to offer ourselves as a model to you to imitate us.” Paul embodied the Christian life for these young Christians to see so that they might copy him. The Christian life is a life of imitation. The ultimate model is the Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul followed Christ, he was conscious that he was setting a model for other Christians to follow.

As human beings we are natural mimics. We imitate without even thinking about it. This is true for a young baby looking into the face of its mother. This is true of teenagers and peer pressure. This is true of language and accents. I've lived in many different countries

surrounded by many different accents. At 6 I had an Australian accent; by 9 it was American; both of these were acquired living in Thailand and Malaysia. Then I moved to Scotland, then south-east England, and now here in the US. The result is I have a mixed-up accent; I'm recognized as foreign wherever I am. As humans, we mimic without realizing it. To have this pointed out to us can be mortifying: you're just like our mother! Or it can be honoring.

We imitate others. But there is a cultural clash between East and West. Eastern culture values imitation. The goal of a master-disciple relationship is to become like the master. But Western society values individuality, uniqueness and originality. The goal is to transcend the master or develop one's own unique voice in distinction to the master. Expressive individualism has accelerated this trend: be true to your own unique self. I've mentioned before the clash between East and West concerning plagiarism in academia. Eastern society values repetition of the master's words. But in the West this leads to academic punishment.

But Jesus himself said, "The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher" (Luke 6:40). In NT times the goal of discipleship was to become like the teacher. Paul, trained at the feet of Gamaliel, understood this. The whole point of rabbinic training was to become like the rabbi. But now his model was not the rabbi Gamaliel, but the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul urged other Christian leaders to be conscious of this responsibility to set an example. He told Timothy to be "an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Tim 4:12). He told Titus, "In everything set them an example by doing what is good" (Tit 2:7). Peter urged elders to be "examples to the flock" (1 Pet 5:3).

One of our four family values is Discipleship through Relationship. Discipleship is not just learning truths but learning lifestyle. This is best done by imitation within relationship. Most of the Thessalonians were faithfully imitating Paul, but there were a disruptive few who were not. They rejected Paul's example. They were going their own way.

A few years ago one of my sisters came to visit for three weeks. At the end she said, "You remind me in so many ways of Dad." Which might be surprising because from the age of ten I lived very little of my life on even the same continent as him. But he had a great influence on my life. For forty years he wrote me a letter every week, not just giving the news, but writing about what he was thinking, reading, teaching. And from at least my mid-teens he gave me a book every birthday and Christmas, books that helped build my library. He was a reader and a self-learner, and that's what I became. So I am honored to be considered to be like him.

There are questions here for us to ponder. How are we embodying the Christian life for others to see? Who is influencing our life and whom are we influencing? What sort of a lifestyle are we living for others to imitate, and what sort of lifestyle in others are we imitating, whether we know it or not? Be careful whom you imitate, and be careful what model you are setting for imitation. This is especially important within family, all the more so now that families are spending so much time together at home.

Not only had Paul given a model for the Thessalonians to imitate. He had also given specific instruction about these disorderly people:

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat." (3:10)

"If anyone is not willing to work let him not eat." Note that Paul

does not say, "if anyone does not work let him not eat." There are people who would like to work but are unable. They are physically incapable, or there are insufficient jobs. The church should care for people who genuinely need care. The NT church cared for the widows, but not all the widows. Paul instructed Timothy that the young widows in Ephesus should remarry and not be added to the widows' list. The early church distinguished itself in the care that it gave to those in need, both Christian and non-Christian. But, Paul writes, the church should not support those who are able to work but are unwilling to do so. It should not enable their disordered choices.

So, it is clear that these disorderly people are ignoring the model that Paul set to imitate, and are ignoring Paul's teaching. They were already a problem when Paul wrote his first letter:

Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters,...to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody... And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive. (1 Thess 4:11; 5:14)

But this advice in his first letter had not solved the problem of the disordered believers. They are still a problem:

We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. (3:11-12)

So now the problem has gotten worse. There are still some who are living disordered lives. They are not working, but they are not idle either. Instead they are meddling. Here Paul makes a wordplay in Greek that is hard to convey in English. NIV tries: "They are not busy; they are busybodies." These disorderly people are not busy working but are busy meddling in the lives of others. Would that they were just idle!

The only other place this language is used is in Paul's counsel to Timothy regarding why the younger widows should remarry. The problem is that

they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also busybodies who talk nonsense, saying things they ought not to. (1 Tim 5:13)

Both the disorderly brethren in Thessalonica and the young widows in Ephesus are busy in a way that is disruptive to orderly community life. Paul has stern words for those in Thessalonica: "we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ." Settle down! He tells them to "work with quietness," in a state of calmness without disturbance, without agitation. For a busybody this is a very difficult thing to do! If they apply themselves to work, they will be able to eat their own food, not the food of others. They will support themselves, not impose themselves on others in the community for support. They won't expect other people to pick up for them and look after them.

There is no agreement on why these people are not working. The prevailing view used to be that they were so sure of the imminent return of the Lord that they stopped working. A more recent proposal is that they were seeking to be a client to a rich patron. Or that they were busy evangelizing or thrusting themselves into church leadership and expecting the church to support them. Whatever the reason, the general picture is clear.

These people are able to work, but don't want to. They are living in a manner that is opposite to quiet calm and serenity. They are acting irresponsibly in a manner that is disruptive to community well-being. They are taking advantage of the community for their own selfish purposes, however much these might be cloaked in Christianese. They are living out their own individual choices at the expense of community well-being, at the expense of a well-ordered Christian community. Paul's counsel is very simple: work and provide for your own needs. Be responsible members of the church family.

How should the Thessalonian church respond to the situation? Paul gives pastoral counsel in vv. 13-16.

And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.

Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer. (3:13-15)

Never tire of doing good. It is clear that doing good does not include enabling the behavior of these disordered people. But there is plenty of good for the church to do, providing for those who are in genuine need: the widows, the sick, those unable to work. There are many ways of doing good: some visible, some not so visible. Many of you are involved in doing good. Thank you for all you do.

They should take note of these disorderly people who are unwilling to heed Paul's correction. Echoing his earlier command to keep away (6), they should not associate with them. The goal is that these people be shamed. Not "that they may feel ashamed" (NIV) which reflects a Western understanding of shame. Paul is writing in an honor-shame society. The idea of shaming is not a personal emotional response of shame or embarrassment, but a public recognition that the behavior is inappropriate, that it is not honorable, that it is disordered rather than well-ordered. The faithful Christians are to put distance between themselves and the disordered so that the latter might come to realize that their behavior is unacceptable.

But these disordered people continue to be Christians. They are part of the beloved community even though they are not acting in a way that promotes the community. And so the Thessalonians are not to treat them as an enemy, as an outsider. They are not to Other them. Instead they are to admonish them as a brother or sister. This is the same counsel Paul gave in his first letter: admonish the disordered (1 Thess 5:14). They may not listen, but they must be aware that their behavior is not normalized. Their behavior is not appropriate in a church community. It is disordered not well-ordered.

Work

It is clear from this passage that Paul had a positive view of work.

Many point out that human work originated in the Garden of Eden, but I disagree. The one doing the work in the garden was God. He formed the human, planted the garden, made all kinds of tree grow in the garden—trees that were good for food—and put the human in the garden. The human had two tasks in the garden: to serve and to keep, but the object of these two verbs is not clear. The conventional view is that he is to work and protect the garden. But my view is he is to serve the Lord and keep the commandment which immediately follows: freely eat from any tree but do not eat from the one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The human is to eat his fill from the abundance which the Lord pro-

vided. The human served God in allegiance by keeping the commandment. We know, of course, that the human failed to keep the command. God expelled him from the garden to work the ground: "through painful toil you will eat food from it...by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food" (Gen 3:17-19). Is this what work is: cursed and painful toil?

But Paul had a positive view of work. A Jewish father was expected to teach his son a trade, and most sons followed their father into the same trade. All rabbis were expected to support themselves with a trade, usually manual labor of some sort. Paul was a tentmaker, or perhaps also a leather-worker, making more than just tents. It would have been easy for him to carry a set of tools on his travels. Though he taught in the synagogue in Thessalonica for only three weeks, he was in the city long enough to work. He wrote to the Thessalonians from Corinth, where he stayed for 18 months. It was here in Corinth that he met Aquila and Priscilla who were tentmakers like himself, so he both stayed and worked with them.

There are multiple reasons why Paul worked. As a Jewish Pharisee he had a positive view of work. More specifically, he had a positive view of manual labor. There was no shame in working with your hands; it was honorable. This was not so in the Greco-Roman world which looked down on manual labor.

Paul worked so as not to burden anyone, especially a young church of manual laborers. He worked so as to set an example for the young Christians. In Corinth he worked so he wouldn't get entangled in client-patron relationships with their expectations.

Work would have provided plenty of opportunity for interacting with people. With customers who came in to place or pick up orders. With people passing by. With members of the Christian community. We can imagine Paul in conversation with many people as he did his manual work. Whether in Thessalonica or Corinth he was embedded in the local community, carrying out his trade in the public eye.

Work today is very different. There have been massive changes in society: a shift to a factory-based industrial economy, then a desk-based service economy, then a computer-based information economy, and now a home-based pandemic economy. Each environment poses challenges in figuring out a healthy theology of work. But we can use this language, a "theology of work," because work is a positive thing. The past year has been particularly challenging. Some have more work than ever. Others have been laid off. Many have had to reconfigure their work. The work-life balance has been disrupted. We don't know what the new normal is going to be and when we're going to get there. God sees all this and is able through his Spirit to give us the grace and wisdom to figure out how to work well in the current environment.

Paul valued work and his work had value. But his identity was not in his work. His identity was in Christ Jesus. Sadly today many do find their identity in work. Unemployment can be soul-crushing. Retirement can leave people not knowing what to do with themselves. Many retirees die soon after retiring. Endless golf doesn't cut it for everyone. We have many retirees here at PBCC. And many of you are involved in valuable volunteer work in our own community and beyond: Deacons, Circle of Care, Adopt-a-Family, Kids Club, sending cards, and more. Thank you for how you are using your retirement. Thank you for not tiring of doing good.

I spoke last week about the lepers in Thailand for whom my father ran a Bible school. These lepers were brought in to the mission hospital for six months at a time. They had reconstructive surgery on their horribly-disfigured bodies. And they were taught a trade. This

was challenging as many of them were missing fingers, often all their fingers. But they were taught how to make shoes, beginning with shoes for themselves, also a challenge since they often didn't have any toes. This required ingenuity from the staff in making tools that could be used by fingerless people. They were taught how to raise orchids and make cards. The women were taught embroidery. They were given the dignity of work. Was this efficient? No, but there's more to work than efficiency. Work has value beyond the bean-counters.

New Testament churches were small. There were no full-time pastors. As Christianity spread and grew, full-time ministry did emerge. This eventually developed into a split between laity and clergy, with clergy seen as a higher calling. Yet this was not universal: the Benedictine monks valued manual labor. Their motto is *ora et labora*, "pray and work." Many of their monasteries were self-sufficient. These monks did a great deal to advance agriculture and its technology in Europe north of the Alps during the later Middle Ages.

In the Reformation Martin Luther restored the dignity of work. Advocating the priesthood of all believers, he spoke against the clergy-laity divide. Out of the Reformation would eventually come the Protestant work ethic, viewing work as a noble calling from God.

Unfortunately, modern evangelicalism explicitly or implicitly often sends the message that if you're a serious Christian you'll go into full-time ministry. This is to return to the clergy-laity divide of the medieval church, that full-time ministry is a higher calling than secular work. Paul would not have approved. There is a need for people in paid full-time ministry. Churches are larger and more complex, requiring a full-time staff. Modern missions employs many full-time, including those who have gone out from our own church whom we support. Several of them have gone as Bible translators, certainly a full-time task requiring considerable training and a long-term commitment.

But secular work is valuable; it is not lesser. I am very grateful for my years in the secular workplace, at CERN and at SLAC. I learned many valuable skills. Yet my employment was not plain sailing. I often joke that I have never successfully applied for a job, and all the jobs I've had I never applied for. There were times when I had no idea what would come next. But through it all I learnt to be faithful and obedient in what lay in front of me, allowing the Lord to direct my steps as he chose.

Paul worked with his own hands so as not to burden the Thessalonians. But for him work was not a burden. It was an opportunity. An opportunity to provide a model for the young Christians to imitate. An opportunity to not throw his weight around as an apostle, to not pull rank and insist on privilege, but humble himself and engage in manual labor. An opportunity to share life with Priscilla and Aquila and their clientele. He was not ashamed to earn his own keep. He viewed his manual labor as part of a well-ordered Christian life.

Benediction (3:16-18)

Paul wraps up his second letter to the Thessalonians with a benediction, actually two: a peace benediction and a grace benediction.

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. (3:16-18)

Inserted between these two benedictions is his own notation authenticating the letter. He would have dictated it to a scribe, then at the end taken the pen and written in his own hand in a manner that was recognizable to the readers. This was the genuine Paul, the one who cared so deeply for this young church, his beloved. The one who had set them an example of a well-ordered life to imitate. The one who was not ashamed to engage in manual labor.

As we come to the end of this series on the Thessalonian letters, may the Lord grant us the same peace and grace that Paul invoked upon the Thessalonians, so that we can continue our work produced by faith, our labor prompted by love, and our endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. May he keep us and enable us to live well-ordered lives during these challenging days of the pandemic. Amen.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. (2 Thess 2:16-17)

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