

# Idleness and Love

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[ 0 : 00 ] Okay, so we're looking again at 2 Thessalonians chapter 3, at least part of it.

Derek looked at the first part last week. And it's really helpful to remember when you come to a passage like this that what we just read isn't the only thing that Paul sends to the church at Thessalonica.

It's one letter. And so even though we've been looking at this for a few weeks, when the church received it, you could have read the whole thing in five minutes, in ten minutes.

And I think I say that to say this passage, it's really helpful to read it in spite of, not in spite of, in light of what Paul has already said in this letter.

And in particular, I want to just note one verse. In chapter 1 verse 3, this is Paul's opening. And he says this to the church in Thessalonica.

[ 1 : 01 ] He says, We ought always to give thanks to God for you brothers, as it is right, because your faith is growing abundantly.

And the love of every one of you, this is the point, what I want you to notice most, he says, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

And I think that verse is really significant, because when you read people talk about the difference between the different letters that Paul wrote, one of the distinctives of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is that it is clear that he is really proud of them.

And he is amazed by their faith, and he is loving, watching their love grow. And I think that's the best context for understanding why, when we get to chapter 3, Paul looks at this thing called idleness, this sin, and he takes it really seriously.

Because when Paul realizes that there's a small contingent in the church that's being idle, I think part of what scares him about that is it's a threat to what has been so wonderful about the church in Thessalonica, which is that their love for one another has been growing and growing and growing.

[ 2 : 22 ] And so when Paul realizes that there's idleness in the church, he's worried about that because that is a threat to the love of the church. And so tonight we're going to look at what Paul says about the sin of idleness in this letter.

And there's only one point that I want to make tonight. And so if you hear nothing else, just hear these words. I want to draw out one point from what Paul says here, which is this, where idleness grows, love doesn't.

Where idleness grows, love doesn't. And what you find in Paul's letter is that it does seem like idleness, if it's not growing, it's not going away, even though Paul has said something about it. And so if you read all of his letters, you realize this is at least the third time that Paul has warned the church in Thessalonica about idleness. So if you were to go back and read 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, Paul says to the church, and it's almost, I don't want to call it, maybe it's not a side comment, but he just says in passing, make sure that you work, that you live quietly and you work with your hands.

So he's telling you, make sure that you're working. And then in the passage that we read tonight in verse 10, he says, even when we were with you, we would give you this commandment, that if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

[ 3 : 47 ] So at least twice before he's been telling them, listen, everyone in your church needs not to be idle, but if you have the ability to work, you should be working. And that's why when you come to chapter 3, and he's using such strong language like keep a distance from these people who are being idle, part of the reason that he's speaking so strongly is because he said this over and over again, and nothing seems to have changed.

And when you read people talking about what actually is going on with this idleness, well, one theologian put it like this, he says, the bad news about this passage is we don't know why these people were being idle.

And Derek has done a really good job of showing how one of the things that Paul talks about in this letter is that these people thought that Jesus was coming soon or had already come soon, had already come soon really, and that they were, that's what Paul is trying to correct them and say, Jesus has not already come.

And some people think that the idleness that was going on in this church were people who were so sure that Jesus was going to come any day that they just stopped working. And they thought, why work?

Because Jesus is going to be here any minute. And some people think that's not what happened. And some people think that the idleness is just people who figured out how to take advantage of the socioeconomic systems of the time.

[ 5 : 09 ] And they just became idle and they realized that other people in the church would support them, so why work? And they just stopped working. And so one theologian said, that's the bad news. We don't know why they're being idle.

But the good news is it doesn't matter because what Paul addresses here is not why they're being idle. What he's doing is he's addressing the reality of idleness.

And in that sense, there's something universal to what Paul is saying here that applies to idleness wherever you find it. And what we do know is what idleness looks like in this context.

So in verse 10, Paul says, we commanded you, if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat, for we hear that some among you are walking in idleness.

And so what it looks like is happening is the people here, there's a group of people in the church who are just not working at all. And they're not providing for their own bread, and they're just expecting other people in the church to provide for them.

[ 6 : 09 ] And let me just say, you could have just heard me say, Paul is really mad at people who don't work, which is not true. What it says is Paul is really frustrated with people who are able to work and are not willing to work.

Some people for various reasons can't work. And the church is always called to be merciful to the needy and to the poor. But the operative word in verse 10, he says, we hear that if anyone is not willing to work, and that's the difference, Paul is saying there's people who are not willing to work. Anyway, so clearly Paul in this passage is his anti-idleness. And the scriptures have a lot to say about idleness and the importance of work.

One of my favorite is in Proverbs chapter 6, and I remember telling my daughter this one time when we passed an ant bed. But there's a line in Proverbs chapter 6 where the wise man says to the idle person, he says, go to the ant, oh sluggard, consider her ways and be wise.

And so the Bible is full of illustrations like this where the wise man says, go look at the ant on the ground and study him and see how hard he works.

[ 7 : 25 ] And see how the ant is able to provide for himself because he's so busy. And then the wise man goes on and he says, but if you're not like an ant, he says, a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come on you like a robber.

Now this is really important to understand this passage. I think it's important. The logic of what I just said is you should not be idle because idleness is bad for you.

And that's not just a Christian concept. I mean, there's all kinds of self-help books that are dedicated to that idea that you need to be busy because if you want to be successful, you don't need to be idle.

And there's truth to that. And there's truth in the Bible that says work is good. We were made for work. But what I want you to notice in this passage is I don't think that's Paul's primary reason for coming out against idleness.

I think Paul would agree with those statements. But the problem that he points to with idleness in this context is the effect of idleness on the church community.

[ 8 : 38 ] Paul looks at idleness and he says idleness hurts the church. And the way that I want to prove this is you look at what Paul gives as his own example.

This is in verse 7. Paul says, he says don't be idle. And then he says in verse 7, 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.

But with toil and labor, we worked night and day. And then this is the line I want you to notice, that we might not be a burden to any of you. That's what Paul says.

He says we worked night and day. We toiled so hard so that we might not be a burden to any of you. Paul loved the church in Thessaloniki.

And he was attentive to their needs. And even when he had worked and even when he would say I had every right to be supplied by you because of my work, even then he did not push his rights and he chose not to receive anything.

[ 9 : 43 ] He was at other times in the Bible where he did receive goods for the work that he did. But you see the contrast Paul is drawing between the way that he lived with the Thessalonians and the way that these idle brothers lived with the Thessalonians.

Paul saying, I worked in order not to be a burden to you. That's how much I cared about you. And these other brothers, they're able to work and they won't work and they're willing to not work and to take from you even if it means being a burden to you.

And the reasoning I think that Paul has here is that he's saying what I showed you when I was with you was sacrificial love. The kind of love that said I'm not going to place a burden on you.

And then what the idolers do is they say we'll place a burden on you because we don't care. It's a sign of apathy. And the choice here for Paul I think is not just will you be idle or will you work?

It's will you be idle or will you love the church that you're in? Will you love your brothers and sisters? John, in the book of 1 John 3 he says this.

[ 10 : 52 ] He says by this we know love that he, Jesus, laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

And then John illustrates what that might look like in an actual community. And he says, but if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but indeed and in truth. And then John illustrates what that might look like in an actual community.

Let us not love in word or talk, but indeed and in truth. So John in that passage is saying the measure of our love is not what we say about the believers.

It's not the words that we say. It's in our willingness to sacrificially love our community. And you know, people ask me sometimes, do I like the church I go to?

[ 11 : 52 ] Just casual conversation or people ask me back home. And my answer is always, yeah. I love this church. I like it. I love it. I love St. Columbus. I love the people that are in it.

Not just the building, even though the building's nice. And I hope that you feel that same way that you love coming here and that part of that is that you love the people who are here.

And but that doesn't necessarily answer the question that I think John asked in that passage that I just read or that I think is implied in our passage tonight, which is not, you know, do you have affections for the church that you go to?

But have you loved those people? Have you have you given sacrificially with your time and your service and your gifts?

Or do you talk like I do? Well, like I worry I do sometimes about how much I love this place. But that has nothing to say about whether I'm actually giving myself to it, giving myself to these people.

[ 12 : 56 ] This what we have in this passage is an egregious example of idleness where a person comes to the church and says, I'm just not going to work and I want everyone to provide all of my needs.

And it's egregious. But I don't think Paul would say there's idleness and that's what it looks like. And then everyone else is fine. I think Paul would say in all of our hearts, there's this temptation to idleness sometimes where we look at the needs of the church and we step back and we say, not me, let someone else carry that load.

And part of the problem with that is God, and the Bible tells us this, God has given every single one of us unique gifts to serve the church.

And he wants us all to bring our gifts to this place as one body to serve him. I've had moving on the mind because Corey has come here and I did not serve in getting Corey's luggage from the church to his house, but I know that other people here did this weekend and I was thinking about moving and how you can move someone and all their things with maybe two people.

And if you ask for help, you might get six people and you could do it much quicker, but you could move with two people. And then there may be a piece of furniture that is so heavy that not even two strong young men could move.

[14:22] And what maybe the case is, and if I understand the laws of physics correctly, you could have a 400, I'm going to try to do this correctly, you could have a 450 pound piece of furniture and two strong men that could carry 200 pounds of piece and they will not be able to carry that piece of furniture.

But if a much weaker person comes and all they can carry is just 50 pounds, with them added to that, they're able to lift something that those two men couldn't before.

And what does that have to do with what I'm trying to illustrate tonight? It's that if one of us here, if any of us here chooses not to serve the church and not to lean forward into loving here, it's not just that everyone else will be able to do the same amount of work, it might just take a little bit more time.

It's that there are things that we can only do if all of us pitch in and if all of us serve the church. Does that make sense? So when any one of us says, you know, I just enjoy coming to St. Columbus, I just enjoy watching everything happen and watching all the people do great things, God has given each of us a gift.

And if it just makes me wonder, this is good news, what could happen if all of us leaned in to serve St. Columbus? Like what would God do by using all of our gifts?

[15:42] Because I'm convinced of this, that there are no spare parts in the body of Christ, that all of us has been given a gift. Romans 12 says that. Okay, I'll move on from there.

So back to my main point of what I was saying, what I'm trying to prove in this passage, which is that if we're being idle, then one of the implications of our idleness is that we are not loving our brothers and sisters in Christ like we're called to.

Idleness and love are mutually exclusive because love is about sacrificing for other people.

Idleness says I will not help, I will expect other people to meet my needs.

It may not say that, it may put it in different words, but that's the message that comes across. And the point of this passage is where idleness grows, love can't. Just to push that point one step further to show that Paul's really concerned about idleness's effect on the community.

Depending on what Bible you're holding in your hands or looking at it on your phone, different translations translate the word idleness differently. So if you are looking at a King James version, everything that we've talked about is probably really confusing because when the King James version talked about idleness, the word that it uses is disorder.

[17:00] If you look at the NIV, which I'm sure a lot of you do, instead of idleness, it says idleness and disorder. Idleness and disorderly. And the reason it does that is because the implied in the word idleness in our Bibles is disorder.

And that's why in verse 11, Paul can say that one of the other effects of idleness is, it says we hear that some of you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busy bodies.

And we all know what is implied with busy bodies. It's gossip. It's causing unnecessary conflicts within the church. And the point that Paul is making is when idleness comes into the church, it's a form of disorder that actually threatens the life of the church.

So the more idleness there is in a place, it's not just a group of people set aside who do their own thing and it doesn't affect everyone else. It actually introduces disorder into the church.

And it's the same thing with other organizations like marriage. When one person chooses not to do a thing, that introduces disorder into that relationship.

[18:16] So I want to move on from there. Everything that I've just said is Paul's words to people who are idle, about people who are idle. But if you read the passage, you realize Paul's not just talking to the people who are in the church who are idle.

In fact, he never actually directly addresses the people in the church who are idle. He always talks about them in third person. And who Paul talks to in this passage is actually the rest of the church, the people who are not being idle.

And what's really interesting is Paul has a message for them as well. And in a sense, he's warning against idleness in them, but in a different way.

And I think the key text here is in verse 13, where Paul says this. So he's been warning them about all these idle brothers who are not helping the church at all.

And then he says this, he says, as for you brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. And that's a broad command.

[ 19 : 18 ] You could say that anytime. You could say that from the pulpit every Sunday and it would make sense. But Paul says this in this passage, and it's meant to be understood in the context of what's going on.

And you can imagine these people are kind of coming to their senses. And they're realizing they've, in one sense, they've been taken advantage of. They've been supporting people who were not working just because they were unwilling to work.

And all of their good, all of their kindness to those people wasn't helpful. It wasn't good. And Paul knows the human heart.

And he knows that there is nothing worse in this world. Well, I may be exaggerating, but there are a few things worse in this world than the feeling of being taken advantage of. And it makes you angry. And I remember someone told me today, actually, how our society, one of the distinctives of our society is that we crave justice and we don't like people being unjust.

And Paul knows that these people are going to get frustrated about the idol, the people who are idol in their congregation, as they probably have good reason to be.

[ 20 : 27 ] But Paul's message to them is this, do not grow weary in doing good. Don't let bitterness keep you from continuing to do good.

And in a sense, Paul's warning against this almost like a different form of idleness, what you might call idleness in mercy, where you try to do good and your good works are not well received or they don't work out or they're misused and it can make your heart bitter and it can make you want to say, if this, if trying to do good is this hard, why I keep, why even keep trying?

And Paul's saying, no, don't give up, keep doing good. And I'm sure maybe you've had this experience before, not just in a church context, but in any context where you try to do something good.

There's someone that you love and you try to do good for them. And again, it's not well received or it doesn't work out or essentially you're taking advantage of and it makes you angry and you say, fool me once, shame on me, fool me twice, shame on you.

And it can be so hard to try to do good for someone and see it bear no fruit. Again, Paul's response is, don't stop doing good.

[ 21 : 48 ] Don't grow idle in doing good because where idleness grows, love doesn't. And that doesn't mean that Paul doesn't have hard words for these people who are idle.

I mean, Paul doesn't just say, you know, just keep giving to them until they finally turn around. He says, keep a distance from them. He says, we command you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you keep away from the brother who's walking in idleness.

And what that probably meant was, do not continue to, well, support them materially. That's the main thrust of what he's saying. It may, and it probably meant, you know, they need to stop coming to worship for a time.

We need to put a distance between them there. But notice what Paul calls these people who have hurt the church so badly.

And I didn't read it, but at the beginning of the letter, Paul references the fact that this is a church that has grown in love, but it's grown in love in spite of persecution. This is a church that knows suffering, which makes it even sadder that there's people who came in to take advantage of them.

[ 23 : 00 ] And what Paul calls these people who were idlers. What does he say? He says, he calls them brothers. And in the last verse that I read, he says, all these people who are idlers, do not regard them as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

So even in the very people who have wronged you, Paul says, don't turn your back on them. Don't push them away and do nothing. And the beauty in that is, even though what Paul is asking the church to do to these people, may sound harsh and it even says, let them be ashamed for what they've done.

All of those measures that Paul is recommending them take is all done for the purpose of drawing those people back into the church so that they see what they've done wrong and then they can come back into the fold.

And that requires mercy and it requires loving someone who has done you wrong. And as we get to a close here, I think it's fair to ask ourselves because all of us may face times in life where we try to

do good, it's not well received, and part of us wants to be bitter, not just bitter to the person that's standing in front of us, but bitter about the prospects of continuing to do good.

And where can we get that strength to continue to do good? Where does mercy like that come from? And I just want to give two suggestions as we close.

[ 24 : 30 ] These aren't just suggestions, these are commands almost. Number one, remember the gospel.

We remember as Christians that we were once enemies of God, that we were selfish, we were unloving, we were idle, and Christ took our burdens from us.

And that even as we are Christians now, so often we are ungrateful for the good things that we have received. And what does Christ do for us? What does God do for us?

He's steadfast in love. And our God never grows weary in doing good. And because of that, we have hope and we've been shown mercy that we do not deserve.

And when we remember that and when we remember that our burdens have been taken from us and someone has loved us and has not let us go, that empowers us to go out into the world we love and the world we know and into this church community and bear one another's burdens and forgive each other when we're wronged.

[ 25 : 46 ] Because the closer we grow together, won't it be the case that there will be friction and it will be difficult sometimes to live in community, but Paul says, don't grow weary of doing good.

The other thing that we can remember is this. Romans 8 says that Christ's spirit lives in us. So the very things that Christ calls us to do, He gives us the spirit to do.

Every day, God is making us more and more like His Son so that we can do what we could have never done on our own, which is to forgive and to love and to not grow weary of doing good.

And one thing I love about this passage is that Paul, well, at least twice, twice he does this, he says, what he commands, he says, in the name of Jesus Christ.

And that's a great reminder in the midst of these hard words that these words are spoken by Paul, but Paul is giving them with the authority of Jesus Christ Himself. So it's as if Jesus Christ is standing here and saying, do not grow weary of doing good.

[ 26 : 58 ] Because I remember John Watson used to say this so often. He would say, remember Jesus said, come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden.

God forgive us if we ever become a church that says no burdens are welcome here. We are a church that's called to love one another and to say, if you have need, if you have sorrow, you can come to this place and we will welcome your burdens gladly and we will not grow weary in doing good.

Amen. Thank you for your time and we pray that you would forgive us for our own idleness and the way that we so often don't lean into your community and we step away from being a part of your body and we pray that you would remind us of your kindness to us and that you would help us tonight, not to grow weary of doing good and that we would love you and we would love your church. In your sons name we pray. Amen.