



“Do Not Grow Weary in Doing Good”

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Scripture (CEB):

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

⁶ Brothers and sisters, we command you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to stay away from every brother or sister who lives an undisciplined life that is not in line with the traditions that you received from us. ⁷ You yourselves know how you need to imitate us because we were not undisciplined when we were with you. ⁸ We didn't eat anyone's food without paying for it. Instead, we worked night and day with effort and hard work so that we would not impose on you. ⁹ We did this to give you an example to imitate, not because we didn't have a right to insist on financial support. ¹⁰ Even when we were with you we were giving you this command: "If anyone doesn't want to work, they shouldn't eat." ¹¹ We hear that some of you are living an undisciplined life. They aren't working, but they are meddling in other people's business. ¹² By the Lord Jesus Christ, we command and encourage such people to work quietly and put their own food on the table. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, don't grow weary in doing good. ¹⁴ Take note of anyone who doesn't obey what we have said in this letter. Don't let them get away with freeloading, then perhaps they will think twice. ¹⁵ Don't treat them like enemies, but warn them like you would do for a brother or sister.

Sermon:

Many of us here know from bitter experience that scripture can be used like a bat; to hit and to hurt.

Listening to this passage, we may already have put our guard up; we may already have decided we want out of church today. I know it happens; I had a gay couple in the church

nearly walk out on me the Sunday I preached about the Genesis story of God making man and woman. Afterwards, they told me, they didn't leave because, "this is Andy, and we have to trust her. She doesn't beat people up with Scripture."

I ask you to trust me with this text, though it is a text that is used against the poor, the homeless, those most in need of help.

Again and again, that text "those who will not work, shall not eat" has been used as a form of shaming, and blaming. But I looked at a variety of translations and I came up with this text from the Common English Bible and it is perhaps more nuanced than others.

When Paul writes, "if anyone doesn't want to work, they shouldn't eat." he is not speaking to shame those who are sick, or hurting, or otherwise unable to work.

The commentators on this passage say in fact that he is probably talking to more than one group: 1.) Those who "loaf about", those who really do receive from others, and ask of others, even when they are able to do for themselves. And, 2.) Those who are entitled, usually by great wealth, and feel themselves above working. They have servants and slaves who work, and they are idle. Paul says they are "undisciplined" and that they "meddle in other people's business".

What lack of discipline is Paul talking about? Not making your bed? Not getting to work on time?

No. he speaks of the lack of discipline of those who have forgotten the teachings of Jesus, the "traditions" he calls them.

And what are those teachings?

- They are the teachings of God's love to the poor and downtrodden, "good news" in fact, this is how Jesus begins his ministry in the gospel of Luke, quoting the prophet Isaiah.
- It is the teaching of healing those who are sick and suffering.
- It is the "tradition" of Jesus' teaching justice and welcome for all, not just for some.
- It is the "tradition" told by the disciples, that Jesus will return, and will return to bring justice and God's equity to all. Equity; enough for all, shared fairly, neither disgustingly painful poverty, nor disgustingly obscene wealth; an equitable sharing of the bounty of the earth, and the work of humankind. It is what we heard in Psalm 98 this morning.

If this is the teaching and the tradition of Jesus through Paul, then there is no room in the community for stinginess, for heartlessness to a sibling who is in need. And there is no room for anyone to freeload (vs. 14) off of the work of others.

You might think first of freeloaders who are the stereotype: the “welfare mom in a mink”, or the person panhandling on the corner with a car parked up the block. These are cruel myths perpetrated against the poor and the suffering. Common, but usually untrue and certainly cruel.

Do you think of Jeff Bezos, the owner of Amazon, as a freeloader? Do you think of the CEO of Providence hospital here in Spokane, making over ten million dollars a year, as a freeloader?

Both of these men are living off of the work of others, yet I have not heard that they do anything themselves to bring equity and dignity to the lives of those who are workers under them.

If Paul is speaking about “undisciplined lives”, lived without love and compassion, without a sense of commitment to the community of humanity; and if Paul is speaking about people who do not work, but meddle in other’s business...then it is more likely that he is speaking of rich people (in the empire and also in the early Christian house churches) who lack discipline, and rich people who do not work, but meddle, without being of help or use to the human community. Such rich people are in our midst today, just as surely as they were in the early churches.

Instead, Paul tells us all, the rich and the poor all together: “don’t grow weary of doing good.”

Give your life to do good. Give your time to do good. Give your money to do good. Do not grow weary of doing good.

I don’t think Paul is talking about anything big and flashy; though he might be. He is talking about a basic orientation; towards the doing of good towards others as well as oneself, and orienting away from selfishness, narcissism, violence, corruption, greed.

This orientation is a “kingdom of God” orientation. One that is a cause for joy. For, the psalms declare... “the Lord will judge the world with righteousness and all the peoples with equity”.

And this is why the trees clap their hands, the hills sing for joy and the sea roars, in psalm 98!

This is what Paul's people, and all of us, too, are waiting for: a return, a turnabout, an orientation of all life in which the presence of God is seen throughout all creation, and all creatures. And that presence of God brings joy!

"Doing good" is a sign of God's presence breaking through us, into the world. And it is a source of joy, even as we wait for the fulfillment of all joy in the "coming of the day of the Lord".

Jesus told his followers no one knows the timeline of God. Paul told his followers in Thessalonica that there was still time to work, to do good, to build justice and joy while waiting for Jesus' return.

And I would add this: look for those who bring joy, look for those who share good news. It could be someone like Mr. Rogers, or Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It could be the kid next door who makes you laugh, or the teenager who has a new invention to help clean up plastic waste in the ocean. Look for those who are good news, who share joy and love, compassion and equity. Look for role models of hopefulness!

Let the sharing of joy be in our work; do not scrimp in the work doing good, all the while, bringing joy into the world!

Alleluia, and Amen!