

Faith at Work: Integrating Christ and Your Career

Idle at Work (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 1, 2024

Introduction

- ❖ It's fitting, this Labor Day weekend, for us to be talking about work. **This holiday gives us a needed opportunity to reflect on the intrinsic value of work and to give thanks to God.** The One who gives meaning to our toilsome labor and strength to carry it out.
 - We're currently in a series called *Faith at Work*. **We're exploring that crucial intersection between our personal faith and our respective vocations.** We want to know how our faith in Jesus is supposed to apply to whatever vocation we're called to in this season of life. Whether your vocation is to be a student right now. Or you have a professional career. Or you're still trying to figure that out. Or perhaps some of you are called to be stay-at-home parents. Or some of you are unemployed or retired. **Regardless, if you're a follower of Jesus, it's imperative that you figure out what your faith has to do with your current vocation – your current calling.**

- ❖ Because, as we've already seen in Genesis 1-2, that work is part of God's good design. God made us in his image – the image of a Divine Worker. **So your work matters to God.** He made you to work. He cares about *what* you do for work. Your work matters to God.
 - And at the same time, **God matters to your work.** If Jesus is Lord, your ultimate boss, then that should effect how you work. As a Christian, you bring your faith into the workplace. That's a given. **But is your faith at work while you're at work?** Is your allegiance to Christ actively working itself out in your workplace? Is it making a difference to how you work? That's why we're calling this series *Faith at Work*. Those are the kinds of questions we're trying to answer.

- ❖ Now last week, Pastor Henry addressed one danger that many Christians are susceptible to. **That is, we tend to treat work as a idol.** What we do for a living becomes the central, defining aspect of our lives. From a young age, we're conditioned to find our identity in our work. We ask our children, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And we don't expect them to say, "A faithful follower of Jesus." We expect responses like, "A doctor. A fireman. An astronaut." And from age 4 to 21, we expect them to go through a rigorous education system designed to help them figure out and prepare for what they're going to be.
 - So it's no wonder that so many of us identify with our work. **Whether consciously or not, we assign to our work God-like expectations.** And it becomes an idol. Because we're expecting our job to give us a sense of identity, meaning, and purpose in life. But that's God's job. Yet we're conditioned to look for such things in work.

- ❖ But idolatry of work is not the only danger. **Just as we're prone to idolize work, we're prone to grow idle at work.** Because work – like all idols – is a poor substitute for God. They inevitably fail us. Which is why we can get so frustrated at work. In this Genesis 3 world, our work is cursed. It's toilsome and tiring. It's a pain and a drain. **Having to go to work feels like this great burden that we long to be freed of.** If that's the attitude we carry into work, then it's no wonder that many of us struggle with idleness at work.

- ❖ Friends, if that describes you – if you’re struggling to find joy in your current vocation; if you’re dealing with constant frustration; and if you’re seeing how all of that is effecting your attitude at work and the quality of your work – **then I think what you need is to regain a God-ordained vision for your respective vocation and to recover a strong Christian work ethic.** One that approaches work within the larger context of Christian discipleship.
 - Our text this morning is 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15. We’re going to study the text, but we’re also going to be drawing from a larger swath of biblical texts to provide a more comprehensive view of work. We’ll begin by considering (1) The biblical warnings against idleness, and then (2) The biblical vision of a strong work ethic.

The Biblical Warnings Against Idleness

- ❖ Let’s begin by jumping into 2 Thessalonians 3 and considering **the biblical warnings against idleness** – specifically in the context of work. 1 and 2 Thessalonians are two letters written by the Apostle Paul to the same church in Thessalonica. A church that he planted years earlier. Now from these letters, we know it’s a church that was flourishing in spite of all the persecution it was facing. No matter how difficult things got, the Thessalonians remained faithful to the teachings and traditions that Paul had established among them.
 - He affirms that earlier in chapter 3:4, *“And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.”* So, overall, Paul was proud of the Thessalonians. But in both letters, he’s compelled to address the problem of idleness. **There were fellow believers whose lives were marked – not by a strong work ethic – but by idleness.** They were exploiting the kindness and generosity of others. In **1 Thessalonians 4:11-12**, Paul urges them, *“to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, ¹²so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.”*
- ❖ Now in his first letter to them, Paul approached this problem with a lighter touch. The correction in 1 Thessalonians 4 is couched in pastoral encouragement – praising them for their brotherly love. But, by 2 Thessalonians, they still didn’t get the message. So Paul is more explicit this time and offers a stronger rebuke. Listen to **2 Thessalonians 3:11-12**, *“¹¹For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹²Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”* So he’s much more direct in this second letter.
 - Now it should be clarified that Paul is only calling out Christians who *can* work but refuse to do so. **He’s not referring to those physically or mentally incapable of working.** To believers whose lives are marked by inactivity either due to advanced age or severe disability. They wouldn’t be categorized as idle. They don’t need to be confronted. They need to be cared for.
- ❖ **So in v6, when Paul commands the Thessalonians to avoid certain brothers “walking in idleness” – he has in mind those who can work but refuses to.** *“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 and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”*

- ❖ Perhaps you noticed that our text is about how biblically-faithful churches should exercise discipline on any member who has embraced a spirit of idleness. **Towards the end, in v15, Paul makes it clear that any formal, public act of church discipline is not meant to punish – but to restore.** It's redemptive. That's why he says to warn the idle person – not as an *enemy* you're trying to hurt – but as a *brother* you're trying to restore.
 - The idea is to keep away or avoid the brother – particularly in the context of the Lord's Supper. It's about keeping him from partaking in that family meal. Look at v14, *“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.”* **The hope is that this idle brother will eventually grow ashamed of his behavior, repent of his sin, and be restored to the community.** Where he'll make a meaningful contribution to the common good by faithfully carrying out his respective vocation.

- ❖ That's Paul's intent behind his instructions. But I realize to modern ears, his instructions sound pretty harsh. Keep away from him? Have nothing to do with him? That doesn't sound very Christian. **But let's be honest – if the words of the New Testament don't sound very Christian to us – the problem doesn't lie in the Scriptures.** The problem lies in us and our unfamiliarity with what biblical church discipline looks like.
 - But take a closer look at the text, and I think it might help you to understand Paul's intent. **First off, it's clear that keeping away from an idle brother is not suggesting a complete ban from coming to church.** Because notice how, in v12, Paul expects these idle brothers to be present as this letter would've been read in their public assemblies on the Lord's Day. And again, that's because the focus is on an exclusion from the communion table. We're not talking about total banishment. What v6 is describing is probably not as harsh as you might think.
 - **And secondly, the fact that vv6 and 15 still address the idle person as a brother in Christ reminds us that we're only to hold fellow believers to this standard of a strong *Christian* work ethic.** In other words, the main concern is *not* their productivity. It's their witness to outsiders (1 Thess 4:12). If there was a non-Christian visiting the church who had a reputation for being idle and refusing to work for a living – there would need to be a conversation about how to help without hurting (without enabling his idleness). But we wouldn't discipline that idle person. Because he's not a Christian.

- ❖ **The point is that this problem of idleness has less to do with our productivity and more to do with our Christian witness – on display through a strong Christian work ethic.** So it all goes back to that tradition – that work ethic – that Paul both taught and modeled during his days living among the Thessalonians. He reflects on that in vv7-10, *“⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. ⁹It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”*

- ❖ We know, from the book of Acts (18:3), that Paul was a tentmaker. He literally worked with his hands making and mending tents. **But, at the same time, he consistently taught that gospel teachers have a right to ask for material support** (v9; 1 Cor 9:8-14; Gal 6:6; 1 Tim 5:17-18). A right that he and his team of missionaries could've enjoyed. But for the sake of their gospel witness, they chose to forgo this right and instead worked for their own bread.
 - **So why did Paul and his associates feel compelled to refuse financial support from the Thessalonian church and go bi-vocational?** Based on evidence from his other letters, there's a good chance he was trying to draw a contrast between gospel teachers like himself and the popular itinerant teachers in ancient Roman society. Who would travel from city to city, gathering crowds, just making a living off them.

- ❖ These pagan teachers were profiting off their hearers. **They saw their audience as there to serve them.** But that, of course, is antithetical to the Christian faith. **At the heart of Christianity is a God who drew near to an undeserving people – coming in the form of a servant.** He came – not to be served – but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.
 - If that's the message at the heart of the gospel, then an idle life (refusing to work and expecting to be served) sends the wrong message. That's why Paul took this so seriously. Why he instructs the church to respond to those who *can* work but refuse to – with church discipline. It's ultimately about our gospel witness. **It's about our attitude towards work and the message it sends.**
 - So what kind of attitude is Paul promoting? What kind of attitude at work accords with the gospel? **It's the attitude that sees work as a form of worship to God and a means of serving the good of others.** It's about going to work with the mindset that this too is about my discipleship to Christ.

- ❖ Friends, I realize it's easy to read this passage and conclude that it doesn't really apply to you. Since you're not idle at work. If anything, you work too much. But I hope you see by now that it really comes down to your heart attitude. **So that means you could be active at work and still be guilty of idleness.** Because, again, it's not just about a lack of productivity. Idleness can manifest itself through an inactivity and sluggishness of the heart.
 - **Which occurs when you fail to see any intrinsic value in your work.** When you come to the conclusion that what you do for work doesn't matter in the end. Now perhaps you just don't like what you do for work. You feel like it really is pointless. Or perhaps the work is okay but you're really there for the relationships – for the ministry opportunities among your co-workers. Or perhaps you see that paycheck simply as a means to support what you consider to be of real value for Christians – the mission of the church, the spread of the gospel.
 - But bottomline, if you don't see intrinsic value in the work itself – and more specifically, **if you fail to see God's purpose in calling you to do your work** – then it's no surprise if your heart attitude is marked by idleness, sluggishness, a lack of any zeal or passion. And, again, maybe you're good at keeping yourself busy at work, but all the while your heart can be idle.

- ❖ And the results are apparent. **Idleness of the heart will eventually manifest in a joylessness at work.** A discontented spirit. A propensity to complain. And, even if it's not immediate, **that attitude will eventually effect the quality of your work.** It'll begin to show.
 - **And, even worse, idleness at work leaves you more susceptible to sinning at work.** Notice how Paul says, in v11, that some of them are no longer “*busy at work*” but have become “*busybodies*.” Because their heart attitude and attention are not focused on the work itself – the idle are prone to get intrusively engaged in the affairs of others. Meddling; criticizing; gossiping; creating disharmony in the workplace.

The Biblical Vision of a Strong Work Ethic

- ❖ Perhaps you've seen signs of that manifesting in your workplace. In your relationships at work. In your attitude at work. So what do we do? How do we address idleness at work or an idleness of heart? How do we combat it? This leads to our other point: **We'll need to recover the biblical vision of a strong work ethic.**
 - We've seen the Bible warn against idleness. Against doing nothing. **But you could say that it also warns against merely doing something – without a clear vision.** So the answer to idleness is not just to start working hard at work. But to work hard with a view towards the Lord. **To see yourself as ultimately working for the Lord.**
- ❖ Paul addresses this issue in another one of his letters. This one to the Colossian church. Speaking to believers in a workplace-like context, he urges them to obey their bosses, “*not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord,*”²³ *Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.*” (Col 3:22-23)
 - **So the biblical vision is to work hard – to work heartily – realizing that you're ultimately working for the Lord.** That means no matter who you report to at work – Christ will always be your highest boss. He's the One who ultimately hired you. He called you to this work. To your vocation. Remember, that word comes from the Latin for calling. So think of it this way: **You're merely hired for a job; you're divinely called to a vocation.**
 - And if God is the One who called you to this work, then he's the One you're ultimately accountable to. That's the mindset of someone who works “*as for the Lord and not for men.*”
- ❖ And think about the implications. **If you saw your work as more than work but as your vocation – your divine calling – then you will more easily recognize the intrinsic value of what you do for work.** Hear me out: It's well and good to see your workplace as a mission field. To be intentional with your relationships at work. It's well and good to enjoy going to work to see and spend time with co-workers. That's a blessed thing.
 - But do you see intrinsic value in the work itself? I think many of us have the mindset that the relationships and people at work are meaningful and long lasting. **But what we do for work is temporal and won't last.** So, in the grand scheme of things, it's not all that important.

- ❖ I think many of us are influenced, more than we realize, by a faulty eschatology that envisions, one day, this world and everything in it completely obliterated by fire. The idea comes from **2 Peter 3:10**, “*But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.*”
 - So the logic goes – **if everything on this earth is going to burn in the end, then what’s the point of what I do for work?** I work so hard developing software for that company. I put so much effort into researching this experimental drug for that pharmaceutical. I give so much attention to ensuring the structural stability of that building or overpass. **But if it all gets burned up in the end, then what’s the point?**

- ❖ But what if we’ve been misinterpreting that 2 Peter passage and missing the point? At the end of that verse, it says on the “*day of the Lord*”, “*the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.*” **So that end-times fire is not a fire that annihilates but a fire that tests and exposes.** When you subject an ore of gold into a blazing fire, you’re not trying to destroy it. You’re trying to refine it. Exposing all that is true gold from all that is not gold.
 - So in the same way, when the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night, that fire will purify this earth and all the works that are done on it. **And everything that is good, beautiful, and true will remain in the new creation.** Without a trace of sin or any ruinous effects of the Fall. Jesus is going to return to make all things new – not all new things (Rev 21:5). So in the new creation, the fruit of your labor – whatever it is that you produce with your hands or your mind – it could very well last and be part of a glorified, purified earth.

- ❖ But that means we ought to ask some important questions about our work. Think about your calling. **How does what you do in your vocation contribute to the common good for all, to human flourishing?** In what ways does what you do for work promote truth, goodness, or beauty in this world? Identify that and celebrate that about your work.
 - But what if you can’t identify anything? **What if, instead, you worry that what you’re doing for work sometimes crosses ethical lines?** What if you come to the conclusion that your job contributes more harm than good? **Then maybe you need to reevaluate if God is really calling you to do that kind of work.** Maybe you’re in the wrong vocation. Maybe the work your company produces will mostly get burned away because it largely doesn’t glorify God and serve the common good. I’m sure the pay is good. But are you doing good in this world? That’s more important.
 - You have to honestly assess if what you do for work – or what you students are aspiring to do – **can that kind of work be a legitimate means to worship and serve the Lord?** Maybe you really enjoy what you do for work. But the more important question is if God enjoys it. If God takes pleasure in it.

- ❖ If you haven’t seen the movie **Chariots of Fire**, it won an Oscar for Best Picture in 1982. It’s a story about a devout Christian named Eric Liddell. Who eventually became a missionary in China and died in a Japanese internment camp during WWII.

- ❖ **But before his missionary career, Liddell was a famous Olympic track star who competed in the 1924 Olympics in Paris.** He's best known for refusing to run the 100M – even though he was the favorite – because his heat fell on a Sunday and that was his Sabbath. So instead of running his best race, he competed in the 400M – a race he had never competed in and a race no one thought he could win – but he surprised everyone by winning gold.
- ❖ Now there's this scene – whether it happened in real life, I don't know – it's before he begins training for Paris. **Liddell is on a hill with his sister, and she is trying to convince him to forgo his Olympic aspirations and to focus on his bigger goal of being a missionary in China.** She thinks his Olympic dream is just vain glory. Even if you win a medal, it's going to perish one day. The salvation of the Chinese people is of infinitely greater value.
 - Liddell wasn't debating that. The spread of the gospel is definitely more important than a gold medal. But I love his response to his sister. "I believe God made me for a purpose [referring to China]; but he also made me fast. **And when I run I feel his pleasure.** To give it up would be to hold God in contempt; to win is to honor him."
- ❖ Brothers and sisters, the same could be said for you. **God made you for a purpose.** For the purpose of making God-loving, compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations. And that includes starting with your classmates and co-workers.
 - **But he also made you for your respective vocation.** And the question is – can you feel his pleasure while you're carrying it out? **Can you feel his pleasure while you're doing your work?**
- ❖ Look, you're not going to feel it all the time. I'm sure there were days in training when Liddell only felt exhaustion. But, in the end, he knew God had given him unique talents and opportunities as a runner. And he wasn't going to waste that. So he ran with all his might as an act of worship – as his particular way of honoring God and feeling his pleasure.
 - **Likewise, God has given you unique talents and opportunities** – as an engineer or researcher, as an accountant or consultant, as a doctor or dentist, as a nurse or therapist, as a teacher or homemaker. **Whatever he's called you to do – do it with all your might as an act of worship.** Aim to feel his pleasure while you work.
- ❖ Your work is your worship. And it's also a significant part of your discipleship. **That's what a strong Christian work ethic gives you. Your work is connected with your discipleship to Christ.** Now we usually think in terms of how we can do what Jesus did – while we're at work. How can we share the gospel winsomely? How can we love sinners and be with them while maintaining our holiness? Those are good questions for your discipleship at work.
 - But have you ever asked yourself, "**How would Jesus do my job if he were in my role?** How would Jesus treat this patient or this client? How would Jesus conduct himself in this meeting? How much time and what kind of diligence would Jesus give to that project you're on? How would Jesus do your job? **That's an important question for those wanting to develop a strong Christian work ethic.** Answering it will help you integrate Christ and your career – to align your faith with your work.