

# Hopkins South Monterey

## United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

November 13, 2022

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2 Thessalonians 3:6-13      NRSV

6 Now we command you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from every brother or sister living irresponsibly and not according to the tradition that they received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not irresponsible when we were with you, 8 and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you. 9 This was not because we do not have that right but in order to give you an example to imitate. 10 For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: anyone unwilling to work should not eat. 11 For we hear that some of you are living irresponsibly, mere busybodies, not doing any work. 12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. 13 Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

## Prayers & Sermon

*In the midst of continual change, God remains steadfast in God's love for us. God is creating something new, a new heaven and a new earth. Each day offers newness of hope and faith. Let us open our hearts and spirits to God's creative word for us that we may learn, grow, and serve as effective witnesses to God's love and power. AMEN.*

Do you ever hear the "The word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God" thing that we do after scripture every week and think, "Really? That's what God is saying to us?" Maybe a little, "Yikes?" This is one of those scriptures that I read for the first time, and thought, "What this sounds like it's saying on the surface can't be what was intended." The thing is, this is a text that says some things that, with our modern understandings, just don't fit with other teachings in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and especially Jesus's teachings and way of living. And when a text doesn't mesh with scripture or Jesus's teachings, or our core beliefs, we know we ought to dig into that topic and that text a bit more to figure out if there is a different way to understand the scripture passage or if we need to shift our belief to be more nuanced. The concern that comes with some interpretations of the text is the way it is used to

condemn the poor. It has been used in public debate as the scriptural justification of not supporting the most vulnerable in our society. An example: it was cited in debates to support policies for there to be work requirements to have access to food stamps. Looking at the whole passage in the context of the rest of scripture, we can faithfully conclude that this passage is not meant to define public policy or charitable giving, nor is it even about poor people specifically. So what is 2 Thessalonians trying to say? Well, it isn't a very long letter, and it seems to try to focus in on a theme. In chapters 1 and 2, the letter to the people of Thessalonica discusses dealing with outside pressure and relying on God for their faith over others. Chapter 1 focuses more on a practical issue, chapter 2 focuses on a theological idea, more in the space of what they should believe and think, and chapter 3 seems to bring them together. Living out what they believe in the practical, in this case, how they contribute to community wholeness. It is easy for our attention to be drawn to the bold command reiterated in verse 10, "anyone unwilling to work should not eat." But that means we look past the details before and after it in the passage that give us some indication that this command isn't just a pronouncement against those deemed lazy. Verse 6 tells us, the ones that they are warning against are those that are living irresponsibly and not following Paul's example. What kind of irresponsibility were they referring to? Well, the letter goes on to say, "We were not irresponsible when we were with you, and did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but we worked to make a living and support ourselves, so we wouldn't be a burden to anyone." The author of the letter even mentions that they had the right to eat bread without having to pay for it. Perhaps indicating that all have a right to sustenance, to food, but they aren't talking about the right to eat, that isn't the concerning thing happening in Thessalonica. They did what they did to set an example of living in community. It is within that context of responsible living in community that the direct command is given in verse 10. If we read the command quickly, with our American strong work ethic, we may summarize it as, "those who are not working should not be provided for." But reading it a bit slower, and recognizing that early Christians had different values around work and prosperity, there are a couple of important details to note. The command is not to any who are not working, but those who are UNWILLING to work. The second phrase "should not eat" has some different translations into English from the Greek: Should not eat, shall not eat, will not get to eat, let him not eat. According to a bible commentary that digs into the greek, the more literal translation is "let them eat their own bread." This phrasing seems to be a reference to the command given to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:19, "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread." Looking a bit deeper into the command shows that it doesn't quite mean "those who don't work don't deserve to eat." But instead, an admonishment that those who are not willing to work and contribute to the community are responsible for themselves. The concern seems to have been that there were some in the community who were taking advantage of others doing the work and causing harm to the community.

The letter goes on and gives us some more ideas of who was the concern and what was going wrong, "For we hear that some of you are living irresponsibly, mere busybodies, not doing any work." The people that the letter is referring to are not just lazy or making some bad decisions, they have become busybodies, or someone who meddles. Just a little Bible nerd side note, the Greek word for busybody is *periergazomai*, which only shows up in the New Testament in this one spot, but it

appears just before a reference to not doing any work, in which work in Greek is *ergazomai*, the root of the word for busybody. In the Greek, it is likely an intentional play on words that implies the people being admonished in this letter are not just unwilling to work, but are meddling in the work of others. It is to those who are unwilling to do their part and are actually hindering the work of others that are reminded in the final verses to live as Christ wants us to live, doing our work without pomp and circumstance and supporting our own living. This conversation is closed with another short command, “do not be weary in doing what is right.” Doing what is right, what God hopes, what supports our community, and supports ourselves is hard work. Doing what is right is not always the easiest choice, but God calls us to not be slacking when it comes to doing what is right.

Other scripture and Christian values help us find some nuance to the discussion in this letter. It is not a condemnation of those who are not working as a whole or even those who are unwilling to work. The verses that come just after what we read together this morning reminds us to not treat them as enemies but like family you want to help. This lesson in 2 Thessalonians isn't about telling us who we can decide is doing wrong, but is a reminder to us to reflect on our own actions and look to imitate the way that Christian community is taught to us in scripture. This is not a text that directly tells us what a public policy on how to treat the unemployed. Spending some time with this passage actually gives us the opportunity to recognize the nuance between those who are unable to work for whatever reason and those who are truly just unwilling to put in effort themselves despite being able to. This warning and command to the people of Thessalonica is a bit of an emphatic reminder of how to maintain a healthy and Godly community. We know from plenty of places in scripture that part of living out the Kingdom of God is supporting the poor by sharing our own wealth, to visit the sick and imprisoned, to welcome the outcasts and unexpected, to not look to get something in return for helping someone else, to love God and neighbor with everything we are. This admonishment to not let those who are unwilling to work to receive from others isn't about depriving those who don't have enough, but is about protecting the community from being taken advantage of and taken off course by those who are putting their energy toward meddling instead of building up the community for the good of all. When the community's energy is spent managing those who are unwilling to contribute or working through hindrances to their ministry work, it is easy to become weary, to become burned out, to become discouraged in living out the ways God wants us to live among each other. I believe that is why the letter's advice is avoid those people. It isn't to ostracize them, or kick them out of the kingdom or to wish ill upon them. It is to keep healthy boundaries with those who are a bad influence and take advantage of the Christian community. As I mentioned, verses 14 and 15 give a bit more instruction on how to act with those who are living irresponsibly: avoid them and admonish them, but do not treat them like enemies, do not cut ties, do not condemn. We must hold to the reminder in verse 13 to not be tired of doing what is right. But we also must create and maintain boundaries for those who are toxic to our wellbeing, the wellbeing of the community, and the wellbeing of the vulnerable the community cares for.

This isn't the easiest of things to be reminded to live out, stepping away from those who are toxic, those who have the ability to do better but choose not to, is so hard. Discerning if someone is living irresponsibly and needs boundaries or needs the

support of the community and should be welcomed in fully is not easy and is something that we should do with a lot of prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Looking at ourselves and acknowledging where perhaps we are not living up to living responsibly and doing what is right like God wants us to, is no easy task either. No one likes to look in the mirror and reckon with where we can do better. But, building a healthy community, a Christian community, a group inspired by the Kingdom of God, means doing the hard, but right things. We don't need to do it loudly, but instead, we are invited to focus on doing the work that God guides us each toward quietly and doing what we can for ourselves so we are supporting the whole community. Our work and what comes from it isn't just about what it does for us, but how it contributes to the whole. We each do what we can to do our part and keep what we end up receiving from the community fair. It isn't about how much we are able to work or how much we are able to contribute, but just about doing what we can to be an active member of the community. No matter how much work we can do or how our work compares to others, if we are willing to do what we can, that is what God hopes for us. God's and our community's grace and generosity can cover the rest.

We are not assigned what exactly we need to bring, what we need to do, what work we should focus on in our communities, but we know that being part of a healthy community as God desires for us, as God inspires us to create, we must be willing to do what we can to be involved. Adam Hamilton reflects on this idea of the Christian community that works together, he said, "Your privileges are revoked upon membership. You lose the good parking place. You lose the good seats. You lose the good worship times." Another theologian and preacher, less familiar to us reflected on this passage asking, "What is your responsibility as a person in the community to participate in the act of worship? You are cheating others of your presence, gifts, and talents when you are not at the table." You are part of this community, we want to welcome more into this community, and we know that everyone, no matter status or wealth, or age or experience, or education, or race or gender, or ability have something to give to build the beautiful community of God with us. We don't compare what it is everyone contributes, it isn't about what we bring, but that we bring ourselves and our gifts and talents and presence to our community and we need everyone's unique contribution to be a whole community and as beautiful of a community as God hopes we can be. This letter sent to the Thessalonians reminds us to take our part in the community seriously and to be active in the ways we can, to not just show up to worship or church events to have gone but to think about what we each can bring to worship, to the church, to our community that can make it an even holier space and time together. God created each of us be able to bring something good and right into the world, may we be willing to put in the work to live it out.

*Merciful God, we come before you this day as those who are often afraid to confess all the many ways in which we have disappointed ourselves, others, and you. You have given us continual opportunities to serve and love others, but we don't always put in the work to take them. We have ignored others in need. We have wasted the gifts you have given us. Where can we turn now that we have drifted so far from your plan? Your voice calls to us to come home, to come to you unafraid, to receive forgiveness and try again. Open our hearts this day to receive these magnificent blessings. Help us understand*

*the many ways in which you love us, and help us share that love with all those whom we meet. For we ask this in the name of Jesus Christ.*

*Words of Assurance*

*Even when we turn away from the work, God is faithful to us. We are beloved of God and recipients of God's love and blessings. Rejoice, children of God! For God's mercies are ever before us. AMEN.*