

To Work, Eat, and Live Together

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Texts: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

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. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not irresponsible when we were with you, 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.

This was not because we do not have that right but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living irresponsibly, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.

When I saw this week's lectionary reading from 2 Thessalonians, I wanted to run the other way. For starters, it is just so preachy. It casts judgment on those who are "living irresponsibly" and seems to lift up the tired cliché of hard work and self-sufficiency, a laughable myth today when a person working full time on a minimum wage salary cannot afford a one-bedroom apartment. It reaches its peak in what comes off as cruel, anti-welfare rhetoric: "anyone unwilling to work should not eat." So, I'm meant to speak on THIS passage, in THIS moment where people's hunger is already being wielded as a political weapon? I'd really rather not.

And yet, this text is in our holy scripture. And like the story of Jacob and the angel, I believe it is our imperative to wrestle with these things. We don't have to come out in agreement with them, but something sacred happens when we commit to the entanglement. So, this morning I hope you will wrestle alongside me for just a little while.

As with all the New Testament epistles, this letter was written to a specific community at a specific time. In this case, it was advice to the community of Christ-followers in Thessalonica, a city in Northern Greece, somewhere between the years of 50-100 CE. It appears that there were individuals in the community who were being disruptive – the word in our text that is translated as “irresponsible” – and were not following the tradition that Paul left with them.

That tradition was to work for a living. Paul himself worked, in contrast to wandering philosophers and teachers who did not work a trade but rather expected patronage from a wealthy citizen. In 1 Corinthians Paul calls people who do such a thing, “peddlers of God’s word.” He did not think highly of them.

Because, to Paul, working for a living ensured that the Gospel he shared truly was a gift. It was given freely, not in exchange for money or room and board. By doing his own labor, he ensured the gospel was accessible to all who might encounter it.

He also freed himself to preach as he chose, not anything to a wealthy patron. Ultimately, he was creating a culture of esteem for those who labored for a living, in contrast to the typical Roman hierarchy in which laborers would have been at the bottom.

So, we understand that the importance of work to Paul and his early communities was about freedom of access, actually about bringing people into the community rather than leaving them out.

Furthermore, close to half of the members of early Christ-following communities were likely enslaved people. Choosing not to work presupposes the privilege that work is a choice at all, which would not have been the case for enslaved Christians. Another 20% were likely living at a subsistence level, close to destitute. So, the audience for this letter is most likely who could afford in some way to stop working and to cause disruptions among the community.

So now that we have a better understanding of the nature of work and the early Christian community, we turn to the injunction that anyone unwilling to work should not eat.

The “eating” to which the author refers is the communal meal which was at the heart of

early church life. Christ-followers would gather together to eat a meal where everyone brought what they could for the benefit of the whole. So those who were unwilling to work, even though they could – which the passage is very clear about, this is a matter of will not ability – were therefore choosing not to be able to generate any resources to share with others.

To the author of 2 Thessalonians, an unwillingness to work was an unwillingness to have something to share with a community that needed it. In the context of the ancient church, this passage was not about those who were just trying to make it by but about those who were not contributing as much as they had the potential to. Far from valorizing individualistic achievement, this passage is actually about best supporting community life.

As I came to better understand the ancient context, to realize this is not an indictment of the poor but rather a call to action for the privileged, my wrestling with this passage took a turn. It occurred to me that, from the moment I first encountered this text, I read myself as among those who were doing what was right, those who were living responsibly. I felt outraged on behalf of those the text was criticizing, but I didn't stop to think, for even one second, that I could be among them.

But there is work I am not always willing to do. Sometimes, I am unwilling to help clean up at the end of a luncheon. Sometimes, I am unwilling to compromise, wanting to be right more than I want to be in a relationship with another. Sometimes, often, I am unwilling to be inconvenienced, like when I walk by someone asking for money. I do not go to the ATM and take-out cash, or engage in a conversation with them, or contribute in a way I certainly could. I am able. I am not always willing.

From my entanglement with this text, I have come to believe the passage best serves us as a reflection point for how we want to be in community together. What would happen if we got honest about what we are not willing to do for the good of our community? Where we are not unable but unwilling to work? And, then, if we sought, by the grace of God, to grow in those places?

By no means do I intend for this message to encourage self-sacrifice to the point of burnout. For some, the work they are unwilling to do might actually be to let other people do the

work. Their work might be letting go of control or taking a break. Only you can discern what this might mean to you. But I believe this letter can prompt us to ask the question and to be brave enough to discover the answer.

Despite his judgment, the author still considers everyone a part of the community. He continually calls them brothers and sisters. He goes on to say, “do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as fellow believers.” This letter, as imperfect as it is, is a testament to the communal project of the Christ-followers, as imperfect as they were. From 1st century Greece to 21st century Massachusetts, we are all struggling to be human, searching in hope and faith for how to care for ourselves and others.

Living together is hard. Living together in a way that is radically countercultural is harder. Two weeks ago, Mike described how the project of these early Christians was to create a community of compassion. Where people’s needs were met equally and where people contributed not to gain status but to support each other in the spirit of Christ’s love. He pointed out how unheard of that was in the ancient world. I would argue it’s still unheard of. But just like our ancestors in the community at Thessalonica, we keep trying anyway.

Our author ends with the advice to “never tire of doing what is good.” Easier said than done, certainly. But we don’t need to do it alone. We can find our energy in the Holy Spirit, our strength in the love of Jesus Christ and our direction in God’s will. No matter what harvest we have to share, may we do so willingly, reflectively and, most of all, together. Amen.