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1 & 2 Thessalonians and Work

Theology of Work Project

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Introduction 1 & 2 Thessalonians

“We work hard, so you don’t have to.” That’s the advertising line for a modern bathroom cleaner[1], but — with a little adjustment — it might have fit well as a slogan for some Christians in the ancient city of Thessalonica: “Jesus worked hard so I don’t have to.” Many believed the new way of living offered by Jesus was cause to abandon the old way of living that involved hard work, and so they became idle. As we will see, it is difficult to know exactly why some Thessalonians were not working. Perhaps they mistakenly thought that the promise of eternal life meant that this life no longer mattered. But these idlers were living off the largesse of the more responsible members of the church. They were consuming the resources intended to meet the needs of those genuinely unable to support themselves. And they were becoming troublesome and argumentative.

Paul, in his letters to the Thessalonians, would have none of this. He made it clear that Christians need to keep at their labors, for the way of Christ is not idleness, but service and excellence in work.

Thessalonica and Its Church

The capital of the Roman province of Macedonia and a major Mediterranean seaport, Thessalonica had a population of over 100,000.[2] Not only did it have a natural harbor, it was located on key north-south trade routes and on the busy east-west Ignatian Way, the road that linked Italy to the eastern provinces. People were drawn from nearby villages to this great city, which was a bustling center of trade and philosophy. Thessalonica’s natural resources included timber, grain, continental fruits, and gold and silver (although it is questionable if the gold and silver mines were operational in the first century A.D.). Thessalonica was also notably pro-Roman and self-governing, and it enjoyed the status of a free city. As its citizens were Roman citizens, it was exempt from paying tribute to Rome.[3]

The church at Thessalonica was founded by Paul and his co-workers Timothy and Silas during the so-called Second Missionary Journey in A.D. 50. God worked mightily through the missionaries and many became Christians. While some Jews believed (Acts 17:4), the majority of the church was Gentile (1 Thess. 1:9-10). Although it did have some relatively wealthy members, such as Jason, Aristarchus and a number of “the leading women” (Acts 17:4, 6-7; 20:4), it seems to have consisted largely of

manual laborers (1 Thess. 4:11) and presumably some slaves. In 2 Corinthians, Paul states that the “churches of Macedonia” were marked by “extreme poverty” (2 Corinthians 8:2) and the Thessalonian church would have been included in their ranks.

The precise situations that prompted Paul to write these two letters^[4] have been much debated. For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that Paul wanted to encourage believers who were trying to live faithful Christian lives in a hostile pagan environment. In addition to the typical struggles against things like idolatry and sexual immorality, they were also confused about the end times, the role of everyday work, and the life of faith.

Working Faith, Finishing Up, and Keeping the Faith (1 Thess 1:1-4:8; 4:13-5:28; 2 Thess 1:1-2:17)

Working Faith (1 Thess. 1:1-4:8)

In light of the problems with work that will emerge later in the epistles, it is interesting that Paul begins by remembering the Thessalonians’ “work of faith, and labor of love, and perseverance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1:3). Paul writes his letters carefully and, if nothing else, this introduction serves to introduce the vocabulary of labor into his discussion. The verse reminds us that faith is not simply mental assent to the propositions of the gospel. It takes work. It is the total life response to the commands and promises of the God who renews us and empowers us through his Spirit. The Thessalonians are apparently responding well in their daily lives of faith, though they need encouragement to keep living lives of moral purity (1 Thess. 4:1-8).

The question of work emerges directly again in chapter 2, when Paul reminds the Thessalonians that he and his friends worked night and day so that they would not be a burden to them (1 Thess. 2:9). Paul says this so that the Thessalonians will be certain how much Paul cares for them, despite his physical absence from them. But it may also serve as a rebuke to members of the congregation who might have been sponging off of the generosity of fellow believers. If anyone had a right to receive from the Thessalonians, it was Paul, whose hard work had mediated the new life of Christ to them in the first place. But Paul took no money from the Thessalonians in compensation. Instead, he labored hard as a tradesman as an expression of his concern for them.

Finishing Up (1 Thess. 4:13-5:28)

Paul goes on to console the Thessalonians about those in their community who have died. They are not dead, but only sleeping — because Jesus will awaken them on the last day (1 Thess. 4:13-18). They don’t need to worry about when that day will come, because that is in the Lord’s hands. Their only concern should be to keep walking in the light, remaining faithful and hopeful in the midst of a dark

world (1 Thess. 5:11). Among other things, this means that they are to respect those who work (1 Thess. 5:12-13; the reference may be to the “work” of instructing people in the faith, but it could equally be workers in general, in distinction from the idlers) and to rebuke the slackers among them (1 Thess. 5:14). The promise of eternal life is more reason — not less — for working hard in this life. This is so because the good we do lasts forever because “we belong to the day” of Christ’s redemption, rather than to the night of oblivion (1 Thess. 5:4-8). Each day gives us an opportunity to “do good to one another and to all” (1 Thess. 5:15).

Keeping the Faith (2 Thess. 1:1-2:17)

As 2 Thessalonians opens, we learn that Paul is still happy that the Thessalonians are maintaining their faith in a difficult environment, and he encourages them that Jesus will return to set all things right (2 Thess. 1:1-12). But some of them are worried that the Day of the Lord has already come, and that they have missed it. Paul lets them know that the Day has not come, and in fact it will not come until Satan makes one last grand attempt to deceive the world through “the lawless one” (presumably the figure we commonly call “the Antichrist”; 2 Thess. 2:8). They should take heart: God will judge Satan and his minions, but bring eternal blessing to his beloved children (2 Thess. 2:9-17).

Faithful Work (1 Thess 4:9-12, 2 Thess 3:6-16)

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-16 address work directly.^[5] Scholars continue to debate precisely what led to the problem of idleness at Thessalonica. While we are most concerned to hear how Paul wants the problem solved, it will be helpful to make some suggestions as to how the problem might have arisen in the first place.

- Many believe that some of the Thessalonians had stopped working because the end times were at hand.^[6] They might have felt that they were already living in God’s kingdom, and there was no need to work; or they might have felt that Jesus was coming at any minute, and thus there was no point to work. The Thessalonian letters do speak quite a bit about misunderstandings about the end times, and it is interesting that the passages about idleness in 1 Thess. 4:9-12 and 2 Thess. 3:6-16 both come in the context of teaching on the end times. On the other hand, Paul does not make an explicit connection between idleness and eschatology.
- Others have suggested a “noble” reason for the idleness: people had given up their day jobs in order to preach the gospel. (One could see how such a move would be eased if they had the sort of eschatological fervor noted in the first view.)^[7] Such would-be evangelists stand in sharp contrast to Paul, the foremost evangelist, who nonetheless works with his own hands lest he becomes a burden to the church. The churches in Macedonia were known for their evangelistic zeal, yet it remains unclear whether the idle in Thessalonica were necessarily using their free time for evangelistic labors.
- A third view sees the problem as more sociological than theological.^[8] Some manual laborers were unemployed (whether by dint of laziness, persecution or general economic malaise) and had become

dependent on the charity of others in the church. They discovered that life as the client of a rich patron was significantly easier than life as a laborer slogging out a day's work. The injunction for Christians to care for one another formed a ready pretext for them to continue in this parasitic lifestyle.

It is difficult to choose between these different reconstructions. They all have something in the letters to support them, and it is not hard to see modern analogies in the modern church. Many people today undervalue everyday work because "Jesus is coming soon, and everything is going to burn up anyway." Plenty of Christian workers justify sub-standard performance because their "real" purpose in the workplace is to evangelize their co-workers. And questions of unhelpful dependence on the charity of others arise both in the local context (e.g. pastors who are asked to give money to a man whose mother died...for the third time this year) and the global context (e.g. the question of whether some foreign aid does more harm than good).

We can, however, move forward even in the absence of complete certainty about what was going on to cause the problem of idleness in Thessalonica. First, we may note that the views above share a common, but false, supposition: *Christ's coming into the world has radically diminished the value of everyday labor*. People were using some aspect of Christ's teaching — whether it was his second coming, or his commission to evangelize the world, or his command for radical sharing in the community — to justify their idleness. Paul will have none of it. Responsible Christian living embraces work, even the hard work of a first-century manual laborer. It is equally clear that Paul is disturbed when people take advantage of the generosity of others in the church. If people can work, they should work. Finally, the idleness of Christians appears to have given the church a bad name in the pagan community.

Christians are Expected to Work (1 Thess 4:9-12; 5:14)

Christians Are Expected To Work, To The Degree They Are Able

Paul highlights that God expects every Christian who can work to do so (1 Thess. 4:11-12). He exhorts the Thessalonians "to work with [their] hands" (1 Thess. 4:11) and to "have need of no one" (1 Thess. 4:12). Rather than evading work, the Thessalonian Christians are to be industrious, laboring so as to earn their own living and thereby avoid putting undue burdens on others. Being a manual laborer in a Greco-Roman city was a hard life by modern and ancient standards, and the thought that it might not be necessary must have been appealing. However, abandoning work in favor of living off the work of others is unacceptable. It is striking that Paul's treatment of the issue in 1 Thessalonians is framed in terms of "brotherly love" (1 Thess. 4:9). The idea is plainly that love and respect are essential in Christian relationships, and that living off the charity of others unnecessarily is unloving and disrespectful to the charitable brother(s) or sister(s) concerned.

It is important to remember that work does not always mean paid work. Many forms of work — cooking,

cleaning, repairing, beautifying, raising children, coaching youth and thousands of others — meet the needs of family or community but do not receive remuneration. Others — the arts come to mind — may be offered free of charge or at prices too low to support those who do them. Nonetheless, they are all work. Christians are not necessarily expected to earn money, but to work to support themselves, their families, and the church and community.

The Creation Mandate Remains In Effect

The mandate in Genesis 2:15 (“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it”) is still in effect. The work of Christ has not eliminated or supplanted mankind’s original work, but it has made it more fruitful and ultimately valuable. Paul may have the Genesis 2:15 text in view when he refers to the idlers with the Greek adjective, adverb and verb derived from the root *atakt-* (“disorder”) in 1 Thess. 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:6 and 11; and 1 Thess. 5:7, respectively. These words all portray the idlers’ behavior as disorderly, betraying an “irresponsible attitude to the obligation to work.”^[9] The order being violated may well be the work mandate in Genesis 2.

Paul’s insistence on the ongoing validity of work is not a concession to a bourgeois agenda, but rather reflects a balanced perspective on the already-not yet of God’s kingdom. Already, God’s kingdom has come to earth in the person of Jesus, but it has not yet been brought to completion (1 Thess. 4:9-10). When Christians work with diligence and excellence, they demonstrate that God’s kingdom is not an escapist fantasy, but a fulfillment of the world’s deepest reality.

Christians Are To Work With Excellence

Given the importance of work, Christians are to be the best workers that they can be. Failure to work with excellence may bring the Church into disrepute. Many Cynics in the Greco-Roman world abandoned their jobs, and this behavior was widely regarded as disgraceful.^[10] Paul is aware that when Christians evade their responsibility to work, the standing of the Church as a whole is undermined. In 1 Thess. 4:11-12, Paul is evidently very concerned that society was getting a wrong view of the church. In the context of the Greco-Roman world his concern makes a lot of sense, for what was happening in the Thessalonian church not only fell below society’s standards for decency, it also made the charitable Christians look gullible and foolish. Paul does not want Christians to fall below society’s standards in regard to work, but rather to exceed them. Moreover, by failing to fulfill their proper role within society, these Christians were in danger of stirring up more anti-Christian rumors and resentment. Paul is eager that those who persecute the Church should have no legitimate grounds for their hostility. With respect to work, Christians should be model citizens. By placing the idlers under discipline, the church would effectively be distancing itself from their defective behavior.

Mature Christians are to set an example for young Christians by modeling a good work ethos. Although Paul knew that it was the right of the minister of the Gospel to be financially supported (1 Timothy

5:17-18), he himself refused to take advantage of this (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8). He saw the need to set new converts an example of what the Christian life looked like, and that meant joining them in manual labor. Itinerant philosophers in the Greco-Roman world were often very quick to burden their converts financially, but Paul did not care about having an easy life or projecting an image of superiority over his spiritual charges. Christian leadership is servant leadership, even in the arena of work.

Manual Labor And Hard Work Is Honorable

The positive view of hard work that Paul was promoting was counter-cultural. The Greco-Roman world had a very negative view of manual labor.^[11] To some extent, this is understandable in view of how unpleasant urban workhouses were. If the idle in Thessalonica were in fact unemployed manual laborers, it is not difficult to appreciate how easy it would have been to rationalize this exploitation of the charity of their brothers and sisters over against returning to their workhouses. After all, weren't all Christians equal in Christ? However, Paul has no time for any rationalizations. He approaches the matter from an understanding strongly rooted in the Old Testament, where God is portrayed as creating Adam to work, and Adam's manual labor is not divorced from worship, but rather is to be a form of worship. In Paul's assessment, manual labor is not beneath Christians, and Paul himself had done what he demands that these idle brothers do. The apostle plainly regards work as one way believers may honor God, show love to their fellow-Christians, and display the transforming power of the Gospel to outsiders. He wants the idle brothers to embrace his perspective and to set an impressive, not disgraceful, example for their unbelieving contemporaries.

Those Truly Unable To Work Should Receive Assistance (1 Thess 4:9-10)

Paul is an advocate of social welfare and charitable giving, but only for those who are genuinely in need. Paul clearly regarded the early manifestations of generous provision for the unemployed Thessalonian Christians as appropriate expressions of Christian love (1 Thess. 4:9-10). Moreover, even after the expression of love on the part of some was selfishly exploited by others, he still calls for the church to continue to do good by giving to those in genuine need (2 Thess. 3:13). It would have been easy for the benefactors to feel burned and become disillusioned with charitable giving in general and to shy away from it in the future.

The key factor in determining whether someone unemployed was worthy of charity or welfare was a willingness to work (2 Thess. 3:10). Some who are perfectly capable of working do not, simply because they do not want to — they do not merit financial or material assistance. On the other hand, some cannot work due to some incapacity or mitigating circumstance — they are clearly deserving of financial and material assistance. Verse 13 assumes that there are legitimate charitable cases in the

Thessalonian church.

In practice, of course, it is difficult to determine who is slacking versus who is willing, yet genuinely unable to work or find a job. If the close-knit members of the Thessalonian church had a hard time discerning who among them was worthy to receive financial support, imagine how much more difficult it is for a far-flung modern city, province or nation. This reality has led to deep divisions among Christians with respect to social policy, as practiced by both the church and the state. Some prefer to err on the side of mercy, providing relatively easy access and generous, sometimes long-term, benefits to people in apparent financial hardship. Others prefer to err on the side of industriousness, requiring relatively stringent proof that the hardship is due to factors beyond the recipient's control, and providing benefits limited in amount and duration. A particularly thorny question has been support of single mothers with small children and to all persons unemployed for long periods during economic recessions. Does such support provide care to the most vulnerable members of society, particularly children in vulnerable families? Or does it subsidize a culture of removal from working society, to the detriment of both the individual and the community? These are difficult, challenging issues. Biblical passages such as those in the Thessalonian letters should figure deeply in Christians' social and political understanding. Our conclusions may put us in opposition with other Christians, but this is not necessarily a cause to withdraw from political and social participation. Yet we should engage politics and social discourse with respect, kindness, a healthy humility that our views are not infallible, and an awareness that the same passages may lead other believers to contrary conclusions. The Thessalonian letters reveal God's values and insights applied to the ancient Thessalonian context. But they do not constitute an indisputable social or party program as applied in today's very different contexts.

It is clear that Paul has in mind both that all the Thessalonian Christians should work to the degree they are able and that the church should take care of those in genuine need. He wants the finances of the benefactors in the church to be used strategically rather than frittered away idly. Indeed, if the idle get back to work, they too will be in a position to be givers rather than recipients, and the church's capacity to spread the Gospel and minister to the poor and needy within and without the church will be increased. The biblical insistence that Christians should work so as to be self-supporting wherever possible ultimately has in view the extension of the kingdom of God on the earth.

Idleness (2 Thess 3:6-15)

Idleness Is A Matter For The Christian Community, Not Just The Individual

[Engaging dialogue on the theology of work \(Click to listen\)](#)

The words of 2 Thess. 3:10 are critically important. “If anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat.” God regards shirking work as a grave offense, so grave that the church is called to correct its idle members. Paul exhorts the church to “warn” those dodging their obligation to work (1 Thess. 5:14) and issues a “command in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” in 2 Thess. 3:6-15 that the church impose disciplinary measures on the offending brothers (1 Thess. 6, 14-15).^[12] The discipline is relatively harsh, which underscores that idleness was no minor foible in Paul’s assessment. The church is called upon to “disassociate from” those who shirk their responsibility to work, presumably meaning that they are to avoid including them when they gather together in Christian fellowship. The intention was, of course, to induce a short, sharp shock in the offending brothers by alienating them, and thereby bring them back into line.

Idleness Leads To Mischief

The negative consequences of shirking work go beyond the burden placed on others. Those who evade work often end up spending their time on unwholesome pursuits. Paul’s exhortation of the Thessalonian manual laborers “to aspire to lead a quiet life” and “to attend to [their] own business” (1 Thess. 4:11) hints at what 2 Thess. 3:11 states explicitly: “We hear that some among you are living in a disorderly manner, not doing their own work but being busybodies.” The Greek word *periergazomai* (“busybodies”) refers to meddling in other people’s affairs.^[13] A similar thought is expressed by Paul in 1 Tim. 5:13, where Paul says of younger widows being supported by the church that “they are not only lazy, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things they should not.” It seems that the Thessalonian idlers were interfering in other people’s business and being argumentative. Idleness breeds trouble.

Conclusion to 1 & 2 Thessalonians

Workplace themes are woven into the fabric of the Thessalonian letters. They are most visible in several explicit passages, and especially in 2 Thessalonians. Underlying both letters is the principle that Christians are called to work to the degree they are able. Work is required to put food on the table, so eaters should be workers. Moreover work is honorable, reflecting God’s intent for humanity in creation. Not everyone has equal capacity to work, so the measure of work is not the quantity of achievement, but the attitude of service and commitment to excellence. Therefore, those who work as hard and as well as they are able have a full share in the community’s bounty. In contrast, those who shirk their duty to work should be confronted by the church. If they continue to be idle, they should not be supported by others’ means. As a last resort, they should even be removed from the community, for idleness leads not only consuming the fruit of others’ labor, but to active disruption of the community by meddling, gossip and obstruction.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Tag line from a U.S. television commercial for a bathroom cleaning product with “Scrubbing Bubbles.”
- [2] This estimate by Rainer Riesner, *Die Frühzeit des Apostels Paulus: Studien zur Chronologie, Missionsstrategie und Theologie* (WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr, 1994), 301, refers to the total including those immediately outside the city wall. Cf. Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 14.
- [3] For further information on Thessalonica, see Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Pillar; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 1-47.
- [4] Paul’s authorship of 2 Thessalonians is taken at face value here (2 Thess. 1:1, 3:17), although the question of authorship has been debated at length, as is discussed in the general-purpose commentaries. (By comparison, Paul’s authorship of 1 Thessalonians is not significantly disputed.) In any case, the question of authorship has little or no bearing on the contribution of either letter to understanding work in the Christian perspective.
- [5] A number of scholars believe that 1 Thess. 4:6-8’s reference to defrauding one’s brother refers to business practices, because the most natural connotation of “to defraud” is commercial — Traugott Holtz, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher* (EKKNT; Zürich: Benziger, 1986), 161-62; Karl P. Donfried, “The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence,” *NTS* 31 (1985): 341-42; Earl J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (SP; Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1995), 194, 202. However, not only is there no transition marker indicating that Paul is changing topic from sexual ethics to business ethics, v. 7’s mention of “uncleanness” most naturally suggests that the sexual is still in view. Moreover, in view of the fact that vv. 3-6 constitute a single sentence in Greek and that everything up to v. 6 refers to sex, it is most likely that v. 6 does, too. Defrauding one’s brother or sister means to cheat them by committing sexual immorality to their disadvantage. Of course, in using such a metaphor, Paul takes it as a given that fraud in business dealings is illicit for Christians.
- [6] See, e.g., G. Agrell, *Work, Toil and Sustenance: An Examination of the View of Work in the New Testament, Taking into Consideration Views Found in Old Testament, Intertestamental and Early Rabbinic Writings*, trans. S. Westerholm and G. Agrell (Lund: Ohlssons, 1976), 122-23; Bailey, “Who?”, 137; Peter Müller, *Anfänge der Paulusschule: Dargestellt am zweiten Thessalonicherbrief und am Kolosserbrief* (ATANT; Zürich: Theologischer, 1988), 162-67; K. Romanuik, “Les Thessaliciens étaient-ils des parasseux?” *ETL* 69 (1993): 142-45; A. M. Okorie, “The Pauline Work

Ethic in 1 and 2 Thessalonians," *Deltio Biblikon Meleton* 14 (1995): 63, 64.

- [7] See, e.g., John Barclay, "Conflict in Thessalonica," *CBQ* 55 (1993), 512-30; Trevor J. Burke, *Family Matters: A Socio-Historical Study of Kinship Metaphors in 1 Thessalonians* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 213ff.
- [8] See, with various points of emphasis, D.C. Aune, "Trouble in Thessalonica: An Exegetical Study of I Thess. 4.9-12, 5.12-14 and II Thess. 6.6-15 in Light of First-Century Social Conditions," Th.M. thesis, Regent College (1989); Colin R. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair: Situating 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, (SNTSMS; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 157ff; Ben Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 43-4.
- [9] Gerhard Delling, in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich; trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76), 8:48. For a helpful study, see Ceslas Spicq, "Les Thessalonicien 'inquiets' etaient-ils des parasseux? " *ST* 10 (1956), 1-13.
- [10] See Malherbe, *Letters*, 258-29; idem, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 99-107.
- [11] So, e.g., Gustav Wohlenberg, *Der erste und zweite Thessalonicherbrief* (Kommentar zum Neuen Testament; Leipzig: Deichert, 1903), 93; I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (NCBC; London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1983), 223; Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 2nd ed. (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, 1986), 338.
- [12] Cf. Did. 1:5: "If someone takes [alms] because he is in need, he is guiltless, but if he is not in need he shall have to give an account of why he took and for what purpose; if he is imprisoned he shall be interrogated about what he has done, and shall not go free until he has paid back the last penny." Translation from K. Niederwimmer and H. W. Attridge, *The Didache: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 81.
- [13] Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains* (2 vols; New York: UBS, 1988), §88.243; Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *EDNT* (3 vols; trans. J. W. Medendorp and Douglas W. Scott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990-93), 3:73.