

**2 Thessalonians 3.6-13 p.184**  
**Luke 21.5-19 p.72**  
**13<sup>th</sup> November 2022**



**Called to Serve**

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*Lord God our prayer is that you might touch my lips, open our hearts & transform our lives in the power of the Spirit and for the honour of Christ. Amen.*

My children often rib me when Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and the Sunday after Christmas fall on consecutive days. *Three days of work without a day off Dad, now you know what the rest of us feel like!*

Today's reading from Thessalonians also brings up the subject of work, and it's opposite *idling*. Verse 12 has something of a strident tone about it when it says: *We instruct and urge such people (these are the idlers) in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down to work and earn a living.*

Well, perhaps a bit of unpacking is needed this morning!

In 1905 Max Weber wrote a book all about the rise of Capitalism attributing, what he called the Protestant, Calvinistic or Puritan Work Ethic as the reason for its success. That theory has always been controversial and probably makes too much of a link between a particular way of thinking theological and an economic framework.

Today the very nature of work is changing. Increasingly we recognise that not all work is necessarily paid and that patterns of work have evolved, especially since 2020, with now far more people opting for home, rather than office based, working.

And what happens when we stop working or simply are unable to work, especially when society so often defines us by work with that often used question asked when meeting someone for the first time: *And what do you do?*

There's even a debate about the nature of work we ministers do, and it's a little more nuanced than my sons' cheeky Christmas observations. That debate is summed up in the terms we use about paying a minister, is the monthly cheque a salary or a stipend? Traditionally it's been called a stipend with the idea that the money released a person from the world of work so they could serve God in church and society. Well, no doubt some of you will share your thoughts on that one with me over coffee afterwards!

So, what are we to make of this talk of work and idling in 2 Thessalonians 3?

Maybe the writer had at least two things in mind, and neither are obvious to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, and neither of them refer to work in the sense that we might use the word. So, let's be clear, today's text isn't necessarily about finding employment because a great

deal about what it originally could have meant has been lost in translation.

One possible reading is to do with that recurring issue in Thessalonians, the Second Coming of Jesus. Some in the church were downcast about this, believing it to have already happened and yet it had passed them by and left them out. Because of this they had all but given up on their faith, deserted their posts and stopped working for the Kingdom of God. That's why they are called *lazy*.

Another reading is all about abusive visiting preachers. The sort who had an itinerant ministry and rolled up lording it over local congregations. They expected too much and gave too little. These preachers (note to self here!) should have worked more and earned the trust of these vulnerable congregations rather than arriving with an extensive list of demands.

Incredible, and really sad, to think that either a confused theology about the Second Coming and the notion that God would leave any of us behind, or a confused practice of abusive ministry was doing so much damage to these early Christians and deflecting them away from things that really mattered.

So, we think this is the reason that the writer of Thessalonians, maybe Paul, says in verse 8: *we did not receive any free hospitality from anyone...*

Now I confess I didn't follow that advice on my arrival here. I came to Amersham a few months before Rachel and the boys, so that they could finish their school year. I counted up the number of meals I was invited out to during that in between time, it numbered no less than 30. Wonderful for fellowship, disastrous for my waistline. Perhaps I should have followed this injunction from Thessalonians!

We know that Paul passionately paid his own way. He had a tent making business and it financed his ministry. Today, in ministerial terms, we'd call that *bi-vocational*.

It's interesting that Paul actually went against the teaching of Jesus on this issue. Jesus, in line with the Jewish tradition of which he was a part, said a visiting rabbi or preacher was worthy of being paid and looked after. In those far off days there wasn't a standard stipend but there was an expectation that if a servant of God came to your village, he would be given hospitality.

I don't think Paul was against this, but neither was he someone who took every word of Jesus as a command to be blindly adhered to. Rather he would look at his context and asked *What was the best way to be a servant of the Lord today?* And for Paul that meant being self-sufficient and independent. I suspect he thought it gave his teaching a greater edge and his strategies a greater freedom. It's also a fascinating example of the way Paul interprets the teaching and example of Jesus, not legalistically but liberally.

Now one of the key points of today's passage is the tendency we all have from time to time of putting in the wrong sort of effort and actually expending a misplaced energy.

I mean, one way of translating a verse in today's passage is to use something of a contradictory phrase and talk of *walking idly*. We might think that to be idle meant sitting down and doing nothing. Yet here in Thessalonians the writer observes that people are

busy doing idling things – if that makes sense. In other words, they have misread what's really needed in this community of faith, they have even misunderstood what it means to be a helpful member of this community. So, says the writer, they are busy *meddling*. That might include gossiping, moaning or maligning. They've taken their eye off the mark of what a local church is all about.

We've tended to repeat their mistake down the centuries. For we too can be busy doing the wrong things at church. I mean, if it becomes *our* club, and has to do things *our way* all the time, which will take a lot of effort, but it will be misplaced.

That's surely where our worship helps us. We listen out for God's word as the bible is read and sermon preached, we are inspired by the servant ministry of Jesus as we gather as a community around the Lord's Table, we bathe our hopes and dreams in prayer – and in all of this we long for a common vision of humble ministry in which we can all participate. Our worship moulds us, corrects us and guides us. We are not a club with a constitution, but a group of worshippers gathered around Jesus.

As I read today's passage, I'm conscious of the fact that what's described in this third chapter of 2 Thessalonians is how not to do church. That's why the final verse read to us this morning is so important: *My friends, you must never tire of doing right.*

I might tire of being on a rota. I might tire of yet another meeting. I might tire of all the behind-the-scenes preparation an event takes.

But that fatigue is tempered by the idea of service. Why am I doing this? Why volunteer? Why put yourself out? Probably there's only one response that will see you through. It won't be just because you like doing it, that may change. It won't be even that you're keen to do it, that may fade. The thing that will keep you going, is that desire to serve.

It's part of our faith. It's why Thessalonians says: *Don't tire of doing right.*

I've noticed that since I started as a minister more and more churches have rebranded the Elders' Court, or Diaconate as *The Leadership Team*.

I think I understand why, even though I'm a little suspicious of a sense of power that might be snuck in under that rebrand.

The church tradition I grew up with is that of having Deacons. The Greek word, *diakonos* in the Bible literally means a servant. In the Acts of the Apostles seven deacons were appointed. Now, I'm aware that the term 'deacon' isn't one readily understood in today's society, but take a little bit of time to unpack it and it's meaning as a servant is surely spot on as it defines the privilege of service. Indeed, even the word Minister literally means *one who offers service*.

In all of this, Christian Workers gain our greatest inspiration from the Lord Jesus Christ, our servant king. Indeed the very nature of our generous, self-giving God is service.

So, I think this is the type of work, and the type of attitude of the worker, that Thessalonians calls us to this morning.

In a previous church that will remain nameless, I attended an ecumenical ministers' meeting at which we welcomed our local MP who happened to be a cabinet minister. He arrived a little late saying he'd spent the morning at No.10 discussing with the Prime Minister what *The Big Society* might look like. It was a popular political phrase in those days, but our guest told us in hushed tones the government didn't really know what it meant.

Well, in the next 30 minutes our guest heard from one of my colleagues after the other of what The Big Society looked like in our churches. Of the honoured and valued place in our communities of wonderful volunteers. Of the countless people in our congregations who serve. Who had been serving in their twenties and were still serving in their eighties. People who in the words of Thessalonians had *never tired of doing good*.

I'd like to think we helped shape government policy that lunchtime, but alas our local MP was sacked from the front bench the very next week!

All of this came together for me last month when Sara made that celebration anniversary cake for us at AFC in the shape of a bowl and towel. Symbols of Maundy Thursday. Symbols of Jesus the Servant washing his disciples' feet.

Perhaps it could be the symbol above an advertisement every church and parish magazine might carry:

Christian Workers needed in this congregation.

Pay – non-existent.

Hours – long.

Promotion – not part of the deal.

Sense of purpose – inexhaustible, as you seek to follow our Lord in loving God and serving each other.

May it be so, in the name of Jesus, who calls us to never tire of doing right. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 11<sup>th</sup> February 2022*

