Good morning, Moon Valley!

This sermon will be the last in a series titled, ▶ “Standing Firm When Shaken.” It has been a study through the New Testament letter of 2 Thessalonians, written by the apostle Paul.

Our text for this morning is ▶ 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18. From this text, we are going to learn some important lessons about biblical values relating to work. Along the way, we will gain some fresh insight into how to help people in need who are not working to earn a living.

As we work our way through our text, you might be uncomfortable with how tough Paul seems to be. He takes such a hard line you may find yourself wondering, “Is this really compassionate? Is this loving?”

Let that tension keep you engaged until we can find some answers later in the sermon.

In ▶ 2 Thessalonians 3:6, Paul says,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:6 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.

There is a problematic type of person in view. He is described as a ▶ “brother,” which means he is a fellow believer in Jesus.

He is also described as one ▶ “who is walking in idleness.” This means he is living lazily. In fact, we are going to see that he is leeching off others. He is able to work, but instead chooses to mooch off other people, exploiting their generosity.

Paul says this person is ▶ “not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.” The tradition received and ignored by the freeloader is what Paul taught in words and by example.

In relation to the believing sluggard, Paul issues a command, and he does so with note of solemnity, saying the command is ▶ “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” So, the command does not stem solely from Paul’s personal opinion or preference. It carries the weight of the Lord himself.

The command is to ▶ “keep away” from any brother who is needlessly mired in dependence on other people for handouts. In this case, “keep away” means keep your distance, cut him off, don’t support his laziness, don’t enable his dependence.

In the following verses, Paul touches on what he had already taught and exemplified, which justifies keeping away from the lazy brother. In ▶ verses 7 and 8, he says,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:7 For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, 8 nor 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.

When Paul and his ministry partners were with the Thessalonians, they exemplified the opposite of freeloading. They didn’t eat anyone’s food without paying for it. And they worked hard so as not to be a burden to anyone. They earned their keep. They weren’t looking for a handout.

In ▶ verse 9, Paul explains,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:9 It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.

As an apostle and missionary, Paul had the right to receive financial support from churches. In fact, he did so in other places. But in Thessalonica, he waived that right to be an example of hard work that the Thessalonians could imitate.

Beyond his example, Paul also had expressly taught a biblical work ethic. In fact, he commanded it. In ▶ verse 10, he says,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:10 For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

The idea is: If you are able but unwilling to work, you get no handouts. Zero. Not even the necessities, like food. You work to earn a living.

When Paul says ▶ "when we are with you, we would give you this command," the suggestion is that the command was given repeatedly.[1] No work, no eat. You slack, you starve.

Despite the repeated command, the problem of lazy freeloading persisted, as indicated by Paul in ▶ verse 11.

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:11 For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.

In this case, a busybody is someone who is "preoccupied with trifling matters."[2] A modern example would be someone who is consumed with playing video games instead of getting a job. Or someone who is busy spreading gossip or arguing conspiracy theories or making excuses but not doing any real work.

Paul takes direct aim at such people in ▶ verse 12, saying,

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[1] The verb is in the imperfect tense.
[2] Friberg Lexicon.

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:12 Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this verse in *The Message* captures Paul's firmness. It says, "We command them to get to work immediately—no excuses, no arguments—and earn their own keep."[3]

Then Paul turns to encourage those who are working in ▶ verse 13.

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:13 As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

The "good" in view is working to earn your keep so as not to be a burden to anyone. Paul does not want the freeloaders to be a bad influence on others. "Why am I knocking myself out when Sluggo gets a free ride?" The message is: Don't be discouraged or lose your motivation to work hard just because some people are lazy.

In ▶ verse 14, Paul returns to the issue of how to deal with Christian freeloaders who refuse to obey the command to work quietly and earn your own living. He says,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:14 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.

Here, Paul essentially reiterates the command back in verse 6 to keep away from such a person—have nothing to do with him, cut him off, do not enable him. But he goes further, explaining that cutting him off is so

[3] Peterson, Eugene H., *The Message* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1993).

▶ “that he may be ashamed.” Not all shame is bad. Paul suggests some people ought to be ashamed, and we should allow them to be.

That may sound harsh, but the aim is not vindictive but remedial. And the attitude is not self-righteous but one of tough love. Paul wants what is best for the erring brother, and having him be ashamed of his behavior is a means to this end. This is evidenced by ▶ verse 15, where Paul says,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:15 Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

The goal is not to defeat the freeloader as an adversary, but to restore him to wholeness, as a brother in the family. A noted Greek dictionary says the original Greek word translated “warn” means to provide counsel about the cessation of improper conduct.[4] Translated in family talk: Tell him nicely to get off his backside and get to work. No work, no eat, no excuses. The hard line Paul takes in withholding handouts is a form of love.

Here is the big idea I draw from this: ▶ Sometimes it is more loving to withhold than to give. The Christian panhandlers in Thessalonica are one example. The most loving thing to do is cut them off and lovingly challenge them to work.

This leaves us with the question: How is it loving to withhold handouts from a lazy believer? How is it loving to cut him off to the point where he is ashamed?

In order to answer the question, we need to step back and consider a biblical theology of work.

[4] BDAG.

The very first thing the Bible talks about is work. And the very first thing we come to know about the God of the Bible is that he works. In ▶ Genesis 1:1, we see God at work, creating. It says,

> ESV Genesis 1:1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

And when God finishes creating the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, what he did is called work. ▶ Genesis 2:2 says,

> ESV Genesis 2:2 And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done . . .

"Work" is the common Hebrew word used to describe ordinary work we humans do. So, work is not beneath God; it is a part of who he is and what he wants to be known for. In this way, the God of the Bible is unique. Our God works.

And God loves his work. As God creates, he continually looks upon his work with delight. In Genesis 1, over and over again, it says that God saw that his work was good. Finally, in ▶ Genesis 1:31, it says,

> ESV Genesis 1:31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. . . .

Imagine with me what the garden of Eden must have been like for Adam and Eve. There are the lush, beautiful trees and vegetation that provide food. And remember, sin hasn't yet entered the world. Sin affected all of creation, not just humans. But at this point, the sin virus had not yet infected the whole operating system, so the vegetation and food are perfectly good and perfectly beautiful.

A pristine river flows through the garden that is your home. And there are birds singing in the trees. And there is wildlife to enjoy. Everything is absolutely untainted, unpolluted, untouched, unbelievably beautiful.

And in the midst of this paradise full of God's gifts to humankind, God gives one more gift: the gift of work.

Right there in the middle of paradise, God gives humans a job description, and the humans are the only creatures who get it. As part of God's plan, here's the job description God gives to Adam and Eve, or at least a big part of it. It has to do with filling and ruling the earth, and it comes in ▶ Genesis 1:28, where God says to Adam and Eve. . . .

> ESV Genesis 1:28 . . . "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion . . ."

Let me give you some examples of work tied back to the job description here in Genesis 1:28:

- A rancher "subdues" and "has dominion" over a horse when he breaks it, saddles it, puts on the bridle, and makes the horse serve him in herding cattle. And the rancher "fills the earth" when the cattle are used to feed his community.
- A farmer subdues cotton when he grows and harvests it. He fills the earth when the cotton is made into clothing for the community.
- A landscaper subdues the earth when he plants and trims and trains vegetation. He fills the earth when he beautifies the community.
- A mother subdues her children when she works to lovingly raise them right. She fills the earth when her community is better off for her efforts.
- A scientist subdues the God-given laws of nature when she identifies and harnesses some new technology. She fills the earth when that technology is applied for the common good.

- A lawyer subdues knowledge and precedent and logic when she argues a case. She fills the earth when she works to uphold justice in the society in which she lives.

So, God gave humans the privilege and responsibility of filling and ruling the earth for the common good.

Work is not a curse given after the Fall as a punishment for sin. Work is a gift given before the Fall as a part of paradise.

Work is not something humans made up to get by; God created it for us to flourish. We were designed to work. God gave us work to be a blessing, not a curse. Work is not a demeaning necessity; it's a dignified calling, designed to be delightful and honoring.

Of course, there are now problems with work. There are abuses and distortions and excesses. But these stem from the Fall and sin. The problems are with the corrupting influence of sin on work, not with the original gift of work itself.

And here is an important point: The privilege and responsibility of filling and ruling is tied to being made in the image of God. If we back up and consider the immediately preceding context of the command to fill and rule in Genesis 1:28, we see that it stems from humans being uniquely created in God's image. In the verse just before, in ▶ Genesis 1:27, it says,

> ESV Genesis 1:27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

This means, among other things, that humans are like God in that we have been given by him the authority to do his work—to fill and rule as his representatives.

And when we get to heaven, guess what? According to Revelation 22:3, we won't be sitting around twiddling our holy thumbs. We will be serving the Lord. We will have work to do. Fulfilling work. Meaningful work. Satisfying work. The best moment of the best part of the best job you've ever had is only a foretaste of it.

Think with me about what all this means.

- It means that we work because God works and we are created in his image. No other creature has this privilege or responsibility.
- It means that, when we do any honest work, we are being godly, because God works.
- It means that our work is a calling, not a curse.
- It means that we were designed to do God's work, and that work is a source of our dignity as human beings.
- It also means that ALL honest work has dignity and value and honor because it reflects God's image in us.

When we see this bigger picture, we can see more clearly why Paul is so hardline with freeloaders. By living in needless dependence on others, they are degrading themselves as God's image-bearers. And they are degrading the God whose image they were created to reflect.

And the more we enable their dependence through handouts, the more they become enslaved by it. Some have called such enslavement "learned helplessness."

In the case of the person who is able but unwilling to work and is looking for a handout, it is more loving to withhold than to give. Sometimes the most loving thing to do is cut them off and lovingly challenge and empower them to work as a means of awakening their worth and dignity as coequal brothers created in the image of God.

▶ James Whitford is the founder of Watered Gardens, an award-winning ministry to help the poor. Whitford has testified before the US Senate and US House subcommittees on poverty and welfare reform. He has also written a book published in 2024 titled, ▶ *The Crisis of Dependency*.

Whitford explains that, in its early days, Watered Gardens was primarily a handout ministry. Then he came to realize that they weren't truly helping anyone get out of poverty. In fact, they may have been inadvertently hurting the very people they were trying to help.[5]

On the screen, I am showing ▶ a diagram that appears on page 15 of the book. It shows how giving repeated handouts to people who are able to work creates dependency in the receiver and paternalism in the giver.

The ▶ first time a handout is given, the receiver feels appreciation, while the giver feels exhilaration.

The ▶ second time, the receiver feels anticipation, while the giver feels useful.

The ▶ third time, the receiver feels expectation, while the giver feels necessary.

The ▶ fourth time, the receiver feels entitlement, while the giver feels essential.

The ▶ fifth time, the receiver experiences dependency, while the giver falls into paternalism.

Paternalism is when someone acts like a parent, making decisions for another person rather than allowing that person to take responsibility for

[5] Whitford, James, *The Crisis of Dependency* (Grand Rapids, MI: Credo House Publishers, 2024), 2-3.

himself. Paternalism encroaches on the freedom of others by doing for them what they should be doing for themselves. The receiver ends up enslaved by dependency and the giver unwittingly promotes the slavery.

Whitford explains, ▶ "We made a monumental shift from a handout ministry to one that challenges clients. . . . ▶ We try to help everyone who walks through our doors unleash their full potential and recognize their worth. ▶ From our emergency shelter services, to our family homeless center for moms with kids, to our long-term recovery and work-ready program for men, ▶ we've trained ourselves to look beyond the brokenness of people in poverty to focus on the value that each individual can bring to the table. ▶ That value is expressed mostly in work. ▶ Our Worth Shop, for example, provides an opportunity for everyone to earn what they need."[6]

A key to this ministry is not just giving people an opportunity to work for what they need but also withholding any assistance from those able but unwilling to work. In such cases, withholding is an act of love that refuses to dishonor them by enabling their unhealthy dependency.

Which brings us back to the big idea: ▶ Sometimes it is more loving to withhold than to give.

Any kind of dependency can be difficult to break. We know this about dependency on drugs, alcohol, and pornography. We also know that seasoned, wise counselors do not coddle addicts. Tough love is required—the kind of love that Paul demonstrates in our text.

We seem to be less cognizant of the enslaving power of dependency on handouts, and even less inclined to deny the requests of those addicted to them, lest we be viewed as cruel and heartless.

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[6] Whitford, 3.

But the truth of the big idea remains: Sometimes it is more loving to withhold than to give.

Withholding can be hard. We can expect pushback. Whitford explains that when Watered Gardens transitioned from a handout ministry to one that lovingly challenges people to work to earn their keep, two-thirds of their clientele or about 2,800 people dropped out.[7]

As a pastor, I have received a lot of requests for handouts over the years. When I say no, sometimes I get berated. "You call yourself a Christian! You hypocrite!" Denying an addict his fix is not always pleasant.

I am not suggesting that all requests for help are from freeloaders. But some are.

Paul finishes his letter in ▶ verses 16-18 with a customary closing. He writes,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:16 Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.
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> ▶ ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:17 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.
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> ▶ ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

And that leaves us with the big idea: ▶ Sometimes it is more loving to withhold than to give.

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[7] Whitford, 3.

How do we apply it today?

First, let me say that this does not preclude helping people who cannot work. Nor does it prohibit helping those who may be temporarily out of work and are doing all they can to get back on their feet.

And even if someone is already working, it can be perfectly appropriate to help them during a troubling time.

The rub comes when we are asked to give something that the recipient ought to be earning or doing for themselves. Enabling dependency is not loving.

This can be difficult for parents. One of the responsibilities of parents is to equip their children to transition successfully from living dependently as minors to living independently as adults. In our culture, that transition out of dependency is getting harder and taking longer.

When I was in seventh grade, I wanted a stereo for my room. I knew exactly the one I wanted. It was a Panasonic. It had a radio, a turntable, slide controls, and a pair of speakers I could hang on the wall. It was well over $100. To us, that was a lot of money. I told my parents I wanted it, and I asked if they would buy it for me.

They said no.

But they said I could work for it. So, we struck a deal. I worked at my dad's Chevron gas station all summer long. On weekdays, I would get up with him at 4:00AM to go to work, and I would come home with him at 5:00PM. We worked on Saturdays, too, but came home a little earlier. All for $2 a day. Two bucks. Meals included.

So, I was serving customers, pumping gas, cleaning restrooms, working on cars, and parking cars when I was 12. I even had my own Chevron uniform with my name on it. I felt honored and confident because my dad trusted me with this responsibility.

When my attitude went out of alignment or my motivation got a flat or my effort was not firing on all cylinders, dad would tune me up by reminding me: No work, no stereo.

When I was finally able to earn enough to buy the stereo, I was so proud of it. I remember the whole family came into my bedroom, sat on my bed, and marveled at how good it sounded. But more important than having the stereo, I felt the honor and dignity of work.

I saw everything that resulted from my work, and behold, it was very good.

I didn't realize it then, but I appreciate now how my parents loved me by equipping me to live independently.

Sometimes it is more loving to withhold than to give.

Let's pray. Lord, please give us the wisdom to know when it is more loving to withhold than to give, and grant us the courage to do what is best. Amen.