**Introduction**: In a sense it is a relief to be past the most controversial prophetic passages in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. There’s nothing directly in today’s text about the Tribulation or Antichrist or the Rapture or the Second Coming. As you know, my last three sermons have all been on these topics—important but controversial. You’ve been very gracious in listening to views that were, for some, new, and for others, troublesome. For the most part I believe you have followed the wonderful example of the Bereans.

In Acts 17 Paul tells about his first visit to Thessalonica, when his enemies started a riot and tried to arrest him. Listen to what happened next:

> The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. (Acts 17:10-11).

That’s the important thing—to examine the Scriptures to see if the things you are being taught are really true. I as a pastor will be held responsible by God for what I teach, but you as a believer will be held responsible for what you believe.

It is my privilege today to wrap up our series on 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Then after Palm Sunday and Easter, Josh and I will launch a ten-week study of the OT book of Ecclesiastes—one of the most misunderstood, yet valuable books of the Bible. I think you will enjoy and profit greatly from it.

In his conclusion to the Thessalonician epistles, Paul returns to a topic he broached in the first letter—the problem of idleness.

**The problem of idleness: its origin (6)**

Idleness or laziness is not unique to any culture or any time of history. Yet I do not think it is any accident that Paul is dealing with this particular problem in this particular letter to this particular church. Most scholars think it was belief in the imminence of the Second Coming which led some in the church at Thessalonica to give up their jobs. As we saw in chapter 2, some of them had concluded that their suffering and persecution were so severe that they must be in the Day of the Lord, the day of final judgment, and that Christ’s return was thus just around the corner.

Let’s be honest, if you or I were convinced that Jesus was coming back forty days from now, as alleged by a certain cult that has been getting a fair amount of press lately, it would make no sense to spend 8-10 hours a day at a secular job for the next six weeks, when everything’s going up in smoke anyway. I have here in my hand their tract, entitled *Judgment Day! May 21, 2011.* That is when the Rapture will occur, with the world being destroyed by fire next October 21. All the biblical proof is right here. (By the way, I hate to admit it, but this group is post-trib. They
believe the Tribulation started in 1988 and has lasted 23 years). The biggest problem with this cult, of course, is the same as with every other group that has set a date, namely that the very notion that anyone can know the day or the hour is clearly denied by Scripture.

The Thessalonian error was just as heretical. Paul told them in chapter 2 that they couldn’t be in the Day of the Lord because the great apostasy had not occurred and the Antichrist had not appeared. Therefore, the decision of some of them to quit working was sinful behavior—so much so, in fact, that church discipline should be brought to bear on those who were guilty.

Now obviously this is not a problem that’s common in the church today. We are suffering more from the opposite problem—that is, people are working like fools to get ahead with no thought at all that the coming of Christ may be soon! Yet the problem of idleness or laziness is still with us. The reason for it may be different, but the problem is still present, and the apostolic instruction designed as a remedy still applies—whether to idle teenagers who are just lazy, or to the unemployed who have dropped out of the job market because of discouragement, or even to seniors who have retired and do nothing but golf. By the way, my sermon title today comes from Proverbs 31 where it says of the Woman of Noble Character that she “eateth not the bread of idleness.”

My sermon in a sentence today is: **Idleness or laziness, even if generated by something as noble as a belief in the imminent return of Christ, constitutes disobedience to the apostolic teaching and should be subject to church discipline.**

Let’s turn our attention to 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18:

> 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. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, 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. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

> As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. 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. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

> Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all. 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. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.
Well, how does Paul deal with the problem of idleness in the church?

**The solution for the problem: apostolic commands for the church (6-15)**

Three times from verses 6-14 he uses the term “command,” and once he tells them to “obey.” Paul is not at all bashful about telling believers how to live, because the church exists and functions under the teaching authority of the apostles. Dick High made that point so well last Sunday as he emphasized the importance of standing firm and holding to the truth. What truth? The truth as taught by Jesus and His apostles in the Scriptures. Yet Paul blends his authority with tenderness, calling them “brothers” and reminding them that they are part of the family of faith.

Idleness, he tells them, is “not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.” In fact, it represents stark disobedience. Some of the commands he is about to reiterate are for the responsible majority in the church, while some are for the irresponsible minority. They’re mixed together, so I decided I would just list all six in order and identify the recipients as we come to each one.

By the way, some of what I say this morning may at first sound harsh, but I want you to listen on, because I will offer some caveats later. Please don’t jump to conclusions about how this passage applies to the unemployed, or those receiving church benevolence, or even the poor on food stamps until you’ve heard the whole message. OK?

1. **Keep away from idle believers. (6)** Obviously this command is addressed to the responsible majority, to those who are working. What he tells them to do is to withdraw fellowship from the idle. Lazy Christians must not be treated in a business-as-usual manner. If certain individuals *can* work but *won’t* work, we are not to socialize with them, excuse them, or cover for them. Instead we are to keep away from them.

Now I know that doesn’t fit our 21st century mind set, but I want you to try to think about it not from a political viewpoint, but from a biblical one. I am fairly certain that Paul’s instructions would not have sounded harsh in colonial America, or even a century ago. But things have changed drastically in our country, to say nothing of Europe. Rights have become more important than responsibilities. People expect to be taken care of from cradle to grave.

Millions have dropped out of the job market altogether, in part because significant unemployment benefits are available for years. I’ve actually heard people say, “Why should I work 40 hours a week at a job I don’t like and earn, say $750 a week when unemployment will pay me $435 for doing nothing?” In New York City teachers who were judged totally incompetent cannot be fired because of union contracts but instead are sent to rubber rooms, some for years at a time, where they watch TV and sleep and play solitaire, while they continue to receive full pay and accrue retirement benefits that are astronomical.

These things are not right, friends. They are destructive to society, damaging to the individual’s
self-esteem, and most importantly, a violation of the will of God for His people, and Paul says we ought to avoid fellowship with those who are idle.

The second command Paul gives seems to be addressed to the whole church—the responsible majority and the irresponsible minority.

2. Follow the apostolic example and motive. (7-9) “You yourselves know how you ought to imitate us.” A godly example has as much impact for good as does an ungodly example for evil, and Paul is not hesitant to appeal to the character he himself displayed, along with his apostolic team, when it comes to the matter of working hard. He speaks to the issue both negatively and positively. First he expresses what he and his fellow apostles did not do: “We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it.” He refused to sponge off the church, though he could have. His position as an apostle gave him unique opportunities to receive benefits. All he had to do is to say how hungry he was and people would have come out of the woodwork offering food. But he refused to do that.

Instead he states positively what he and his fellow apostles did (the last half of verse 8) : “With toil and labor we worked night and day.” The Greek literally reads, “with slaving and straining.” During the daylight hours he taught, discipled, evangelized, and defended the faith. At night he made tents so as to provide for his own board and room.

His motive for doing so was to avoid being a burden and to put example before rights. Verse 9, “It was not because we did not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.” Paul spoke often of his rights as an apostle, and never more strongly than in 1 Corinthians 9. Listen to his passionate defense there:

Is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?

Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? (1 Cor. 9:6-12)

Yet in the very next verse he adds, “Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.” Clearly Paul put more stock in his responsibilities than in his rights. Both are important, and of course, you can’t give up your rights unless you have them in the first place. Paul was willing to waive his rights whenever he judged that to do so would advance the cause of Christ.

Not only did Paul set an example for the believers: he also embodied his teaching in a pithy
3. Obey the apostolic principle: “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”

(10) Now a most important word appears there in verse 10. It is the word “willing,” and we must not overlook it. There are some people who are very willing to work but cannot. Perhaps they have a disability, or they’re too young or too old to be employed, or they have even greater responsibility, e.g., small children in the home, or they have tried hard and they really cannot find a job. Paul is not talking about such people. But if a person is not willing to work, then the Apostle says he shall not eat.

Paul knows that hunger is a very effective cure for idleness, but the problem is that we in Western society have decided that hunger is inherently immoral and therefore must not, under any circumstances, be allowed. The government, social service agencies, and even Christian organizations have adopted the notion that food is a fundamental human right. Of course, it’s only one among a long and growing list of human rights that started off pretty short—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Now the list includes many additional rights that the founders of our country would be stunned at—like Miranda rights, health insurance, collective bargaining, access to wireless, freedom from pollution—you name it. Well, friends, Paul didn’t even view food as a fundamental human right. He felt there are certain people who do NOT have the right to eat. Don’t argue with me—it’s in the Book!

His fourth command is directed at the idle and is found at the end of verse 12.

4. Earn your own living. (11-12) But before he gets there, Paul states again that certain people in the church are walking in idleness. He says of these loafers that they are not busy at work, but are busybodies. The play on words in English is also present in Greek. Having no work of their own to keep them occupied, they have become meddlesome in the affairs of others. And Paul doesn’t mince words with them. He says, “Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.” I’m not sure what the point is in “doing your work quietly,” but perhaps it is a reference to the excitability they have shown regarding the alleged nearness of the Second Coming. They have been thrown into a dither and he wants them to just calm down. More importantly, they are to earn their own living. No freeloading!

Now in verse 13 Paul turns back to the majority of the church members who are acting responsibly, and he tells them, “Do not grow weary in doing good.”

5. Never tire of doing the right thing. (13) The exhortation is couched in general terms, broad enough to cover the whole of life. But I suspect it speaks here specifically to the issue at hand. What might cause the responsible people to tire? Perhaps having to go to work every day while their fellow church members have decided to freeload. Or perhaps it is the obligation they feel to bring the erring, idle brothers back to the truth. Think about this for a moment. What kinds of attitudes do lazy people generate among responsible people? How about irritability,
annoyance, anger, disgust? Obviously, if we begin to feel that way about our brothers and sisters in the Church, we need the exhortation to not become weary in doing good, so that the divide between brothers does not become even greater.

I might add that unfortunately these same attitudes of annoyance, anger, and disgust, are sometimes generated toward the poor, the unemployed, the homeless, and the disabled who cannot help their idleness. We absolutely need to heed this exhortation in those cases—“Do not grow weary in doing good.” Meet their needs, love them, respect them, whatever it takes.

The final command is clearly directed again to the responsible majority.

6. Apply church discipline. (14-15) In verses 14 and 15 Paul comes back to the point he made in verse 6: “Keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness.” Only now he expands upon it and discusses the appropriate process of discipline that should be used in the church. You’re perhaps aware that 1 Corinthians 5 is the key NT passage on church discipline. It is there that Paul discusses how sins of immorality should be handled in the church. His approach to discipline for idleness is different, though there are some similarities.

The need for discipline. The need is due to disobedience to apostolic teaching by the idle. But Paul seems to be giving the irresponsible a chance to correct their behavior, because he speaks of the consequences of disobedience to “what we say in this letter.” If when they read this letter they go back to work, everything will be OK. But if they continue in disobedience, then the church needs to take note of that such persons and institute discipline. Well, what is the nature of the discipline?

The nature of discipline is a withdrawal of fellowship. That is not as severe as in 1 Cor. 5, for there the withdrawal is defined as “not even to eat with him.” That person was to be excommunicated. Here the person is still in the family, though a disobedient brother.

The purpose of discipline is so “that he may be ashamed.” The verb has the meaning of “being turned in upon oneself.” He is after a process of reflection concerning the seriousness of the idle behavior. But ultimately Paul has in mind the person’s restoration and reinstatement.

The spirit of the discipline. He says in verse 15, “Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.” Paul is eager to protect the brother’s standing as a member of the family of faith and to see that the discipline is properly motivated.

Allow me to summarize the teaching in this passage by returning to my Sermon in a Sentence: Idleness or laziness, even if generated by something as noble as a belief in the imminent return of Christ, constitutes disobedience to the apostolic teaching and should be subject to church discipline. This is not a matter to be treated lightly. Nor must we make the mistake of lumping every poor, disadvantaged, homeless or unemployed person in this category. Paul is talking about those who can work but won’t.
We come now to the conclusion of the letter.

**A three-fold blessing on the Church at Thessalonica (16-18)**

Paul closes most of his NT letters with a short prayer for three things.

**The Lord’s peace.** “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way.” It is more common for Paul to speak of the God of peace, whereas here he seems to have the Lord Jesus in mind. I think this is a reminder to the Thessalonians that the solution to the problems before them, including that of the lazy and the disobedient, rests not in their own efforts but in the help which the Lord is able to give them. There may always be divisive issues in the church, but the Lord we serve is a Lord of peace.

**The Lord’s presence.** It is only as the Lord is present in the heart of the believer day by day that we can know this peace. We need to practice the presence of Christ–taking the time to listen to Him, talk to Him, read His Word.

Before addressing the third item Paul takes time to note the method he used to authenticate his writings. Though he used a secretary to write his letters, no doubt because of his poor eyesight, he always wrote the final greeting with his own hand. He draws special attention to this practice here, probably because back in chapter 2, verse 2 he had mentioned the possibility that the heresy that had so badly affected the church had been generated in a forged letter. He wants them to know for sure that the instructions he has given in this letter are genuine apostolic instructions that must not be ignored.

He closes with his third prayer: “The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you all.”

**The Lord’s grace.** Did you notice that the phrase “be with you all,” is found both in verse 16 and 18. “The Lord be with you all.” “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.” I suspect this evidences Paul’s tender feelings for the entire congregation. He has had some hard things to say about heresies floating around the church and about those who were lazy and idle, but he closes on an inclusive note. All his friends are included in this final prayer.

**Conclusion:** So where do we go with these two letters we have spent the past several months studying? Will we just store up some more biblical knowledge? Will we continue to debate whether the rapture of the church is pre, mid, post, or pre-wrath, and continue to speculate on who the Antichrist is? Will we come away from this last chapter with an even more negative attitude toward the poor, the homeless, and those on welfare? I hope none of these things.

I hope what we come away with more than anything else is a renewed sense of the importance of the Gospel, a theme which has permeated both books more than any other. The Gospel is the good news that Jesus died to provide forgiveness for our sin, to give life to the church, to give
hope for the future, and to enable us to live as responsible citizens both of this world and of His kingdom. Without Jesus, none of these things is possible; with Him, all of it is possible.