

*“Don’t Grow Weary”*

Meditation on 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

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Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

*“Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle 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 in idleness, 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. Brothers and sisters, do not grow weary in doing what is right.”*

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I met a man this week that happily uses the talents and gifts God has given him for the sake of Jesus Christ. His name is Randy Hofman, and he is a sand artist and evangelist in Ocean City, Md. He encouraged me to share his story and gave me permission to show pictures of his art, for this is truly his labor of love for the Lord. You may have seen pictures of his art and not known that it was his. Sometimes his art has been mistakenly credited to another Maryland artist. Pictures of Randy’s massive sand sculptures are posted all over the Internet and are often the subject of emails forwarded to friends. That’s how I first learned about Randy, who has done this for more than 3 decades. He works with simple tools-- his hands, a plastic knife used for picking

crabs, and a bottle of watered-down Elmer's glue, which he sprays on the sculptures to help them survive wind and rain. If you want to see his 8 to 20 foot sculptures in person, you have to go to the Boardwalk at Ocean City and stop in front of the Plim Plaza Hotel. His favorite themes are Christ on the cross, The Last Supper, Jesus praying, and Noah's ark. Randy, an ordained minister since 1985, gives away a small, 32-page Bible booklet to anyone who wants one; each summer, about 50,000 people take his booklet. Most recently, he has completed a child's coloring book of his sand sculptures that are available at his Website: <http://www.randyhofman.com/coloring-book/2015/7/23/wkucp4ttp6hdi6fxivzwhiay3s7il2>

Randy depends on donations, along with earnings from his oil painting, for his living and mission expenses. Many people drop a nickel, quarter or dollar in a glass container in front of his artwork. Some people leave notes, thanking him. Some stop to pray.

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When I heard Randy's story, I thought what a great example of what the Apostle Paul is trying to teach all who wish to be faithful to labor for Christ's sake. Most Christians just think of making disciples when Christ says, "The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few." But when we read today's epistle, we begin to understand that **all of our lives** are a witness to the work of Jesus Christ. Our labor includes what we do 7 days a week using the gifts, talents and opportunities God gives us, some of which leads us to earn money for our families and to share with the

community so that all have “bread” to eat. Yes, this passage in First Thessalonians is about stewardship--our call to make the most of every day and all that God has given us to care for and build up the Church of Jesus Christ. We are called to love and to *work every day*, as if we are loving and working for Jesus. This is what Paul is talking about when he says in 2 Thess. 3:13, “*Brothers and sisters, do not grow weary in doing what is right.*”

The problem in the church in Thessalonica is that some people believe that Jesus has already returned for His Church or is coming so quickly that there is no need to work. Those refusing to work are living off the generosity of others and causing strife. Paul warns the church, in verse 6, *to keep away* from the idle, but this word translated “idle” also has a sense of disorder or “disruptively idle”; the rebellion of some people threatens the peace and wellbeing of the entire community. They are, he says in verse 11, “mere busybodies, not doing any work!” Paul, who hates gossip for its destructive power in the church, thought he had taken care of the problem when he wrote his first letter to the church at Thessalonica, a cosmopolitan city at the intersection of two major Roman roads in what is today Greece. The majority of the population of ancient Thessalonica is Greek, but Jews have migrated there, too, along with God-fearing Gentiles. The majority of the Church at Thessalonica, however, is not Jewish or God-fearing Gentiles. They are pagans. Paul writes in 1 Thess. 1:9-10: “For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and *how you turned to God from idols*, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead.” In First Thessalonians, Paul

writes more gently to the church of new believers that aren't sure how they should live as Christians. Paul tells them of the importance of love and work! "Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters .... But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you." (1 Thess. 4:9-11)

Paul in 2 Thessalonians, as he often does, uses himself as an example. "**We** were not (disruptively) idle when we were with you," he writes in verses 7-8, "**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." It's remarkable that when Paul claims to have been working "night and day," he doesn't distinguish between his work as an evangelist and his trade that allows him to make a living and support his community. In Acts 18:2-3, we learn that Paul is a tentmaker. While he is in Corinth, he meets a Jewish man named Aquila, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla. Paul went to visit them "and he stayed and worked with them because they were tentmakers by trade, just as he was." I think Paul purposefully does not distinguish between his work as a church planter and his trade that allows him to make a living. He wants us to understand that everything he does--whether it be preaching, raising up leaders for churches or making tents -- is an offering of himself for the Lord.

Paul says in Acts 20:33-35, while living and working in Ephesus, "I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that

these hands ministered to my necessities, and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, *'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*"

Friends, the work we do to make a living and to help the needy of our community is both a gift and a calling from God. We are called to love. We are called to *work*--and when we love and work as an offering to the Lord, we are blessed. We won't grow weary of doing what is right!

Our lives are holy and set apart for God, even as we labor in the world with our hands, like Paul the tentmaker and Randy Hofman the sand sculptor, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

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Randy has been playing or working at the beach since he was a small child growing up in the Washington, D.C. area and coming to Ocean City for family vacations. This was Ocean City, Md., in the 1950s. He was one of nine children. They all played in the sand like other kids -- making roads, tunnels and sand castles.

Randy knew, when he was in second grade, that he wanted to be an artist. He didn't imagine as a child, though, that he would be making sand sculptures. He attended the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY, and studied advertising design and visual communications. He came to Ocean City in 1974 and created chalk murals on concrete next to the Boardwalk. Then he learned sand sculpture from another artist.

In the beginning, Randy could only make one sculpture a day--not because the tide carried it away but because he didn't have water and had to dig down past the dry, hot surface sand for moist sand. He worked at night after the sun went down so his sculptures would retain moisture. Usually, by noon the next day, though, the sculpture had dried out and disintegrated. He had to start over. This part of the job is easier now because the owners of the Plim Plaza supply him with water and electricity. He presents up to 4 sculptures at a time now, and they are good for a week when he sprays them with the watered down, biodegradable glue.

Kids attending an outreach mission in Ocean City called SonSpot help Randy with his sand digging now. They come from six or seven Mid-Atlantic States. Helping Randy with the sand sculptures is part of their mission. The physical aspect of sculpting is his biggest challenge, says Randy, who is about 65 years old. He does grow weary, even in this work he does for love of the Lord. But he doesn't plan on stopping any time soon. "It strains the back and gives me giant leg cramps," he says, "so I take more breaks now. Lord willing, I'd like to continue for years to come."

Let us pray.

Lord God, we thank you for your gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, who gave his life so that we might be forgiven for all our sins--and have everlasting life with you! We thank you for your love for us; we ask that you stir us to love others, more and more, and to shine the light of Christ

in all the dark places of this world. Thank you for Randy's calling to minister through his sand sculpture and for our work, Lord, that we do for you each day--the work that supports our families and your church so that we may continue to proclaim your gospel with loving words and acts of kindness to people in need. Forgive us, Lord, for sometimes growing weary of the demands of work and being tempted to be idle, like the early Christians in Thessalonica. Keep us, Lord, from the temptation to gossip and disrupt the peace and unity of your Church. Keep us busy doing what is right and pleasing to you. Remind us that everything we do is FOR YOU. Guide and empower us to do your will. Renew us with your Spirit and the knowledge that Your Son, Jesus Christ, is coming soon to gather us to Himself. Amen.