

Sermon Transcript

May 24, 2015



Five Hats We Wear: A Steward

2 Thessalonians 3:5-13

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 24, 2015, at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
2 Thessalonians 3:5-13

⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

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. 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. ⁹ It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. 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. ¹¹ For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹² Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

¹³ As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

Introduction

Our passage this morning contains a very clear call “to work.” Paul makes a concluding statement in 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.*” Apparently, there were a handful of people within the church at Thessalonica who were idle, who were not taking the issue of work seriously. Paul writes in verse 11, “*For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.*” And so the value that Paul is holding up here is the ideal of good hard work. We are to earn our living and to be “*busy at work.*”

My wife reminded me this week of one of the songs from the movie *Wizard of Oz*. It is the song “The Merry Old Land of Oz” and it is being sung as Dorothy and her companions are being paraded along in a horse drawn carriage as they make their way to visit the Wizard of Oz. The song goes like this, “Ha - ha - ha, Ho - ho - ho - And a couple of tra - la - las. That's how we laugh the day away, In the Merry Old Land of Oz! . . . We get up at twelve and start to work at one. Take an hour for lunch and then at two we're done. Jolly good fun!” So perhaps Paul is saying to the church at Thessalonica, “you don't live in the Merry Old Land of Oz!” Rather, work is good and there is joy in it. We were created to work. One of the ways we live out our faith is that we tend to the matter of work and earn our living. We are not to be given to idleness.

As we are coming to the end of this series, I feel as though some of what we are talking about regarding work is a bit repetitive. Every week we have been talking about how our work, our jobs, are opportunities to partner with what God is doing in this world and to serve and love others. That seems to be where we land week after week, and quite honestly, where we will land this morning as well. But here is the variable that changes from week to week. Each week there is a different nuance of the gospel that becomes the motivating factor and the power for us to love God and others through our work.

The first thing we saw was that we are “Royal Reps” who bear the image of God and bring the presence of God into the work place. As God is transforming us into the image of Christ “*from one degree of glory to the next*” we reflect his image as we create, sustain and renew. Then we saw that our work is an opportunity to “imitate God” and his work in this world and so as “twins of heart” when God is at the hub of our lives, every “spoke of life”, including work, becomes an environment where we can reflect the character of God. God is both our portion in life and our power to love. Last week we saw that since we are sons and daughters of God, adopted into the family of God, members of God's kingdom, loved by God, we are free and able to love through our work. Love for God and others is the constant result of the gospel at work in us.

So can you see that it is the gospel that enables and empowers us to love God and others in and through our work? It is Christ transforming us that empowers us to love. It is God at the hub of our lives that enables us to love in every area of life. It is the reality that I am loved by God as an adopted son that I am now free to love. And so one way I demonstrate that love is through the job I do and by the way I do it.

And so it is this morning. It would be very easy to approach this passage with a simple command and a simple response. “Don’t be idle!” “Get busy and work!” But to what end? It is easy for us to read our passage this morning through the lens of our American culture, which values hard work, and yet possibly does so for the wrong reason. One of the underlying values that “drives us to work hard” in our culture is the attitude of consumerism. Self becomes the focus of our efforts. Is that the essence of the command we find in our passage this morning? We are busy at work. We are working hard. We may even be working harder than we ever have before. So on the surface it looks like we are living up to the standard Paul is laying out for us here in the letter he wrote to the Thessalonians. But as it is often with the commands we find in Scripture, it is not the mere external keeping of the command that we are concerned about this morning. The motive is very important. Tim Keller calls it “the work under the work.”¹ What is “the work under the work” that is driving you to be “*busy at work*”?

Just like the last few weeks, the end goal of our work this morning is partnering with God in what he is doing in this world and using our work as a means to love others. You can even see this emphasis in our passage this morning. Look at what bookends the command to not be idle and be busy at work. It is love. In verse 5 it is the “*love of God and the steadfastness of Christ*” that anchors this command. Then in verse 13 it is the call to “*not grow weary and doing good*”, that is the love of others, which becomes the goal of our labor. Once again, the sum and application of our labor is that it is a vehicle for us to love God and others. But the question this morning becomes, what is it about the gospel that empowers us to live out this command in a way that honors God?

The gospel motive for “not being idle” and for “being busy at work” is once again found in who we are in Christ. We are stewards of God. A steward is someone who lives under the authority of someone else. As a steward we are entrusted with something that ultimately belongs to someone else and we are responsible for how we handle that trust. This stewardship was first given to us at creation when we were told as God’s image-bearers, “*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.*” In this way we exercise *dominion* under God in this world God has made. May I remind you what Nancy Pearcey said about this. She said, this is “the first job description” ever posted. She goes on to say, “‘*to be fruitful and multiply*’ means to develop the social world, build families, churches, schools, cities, governments, laws. The second phrase,

'subdue the earth' means to harness the natural world: plant crops, build bridges, design computers, compose music. This is what some call the Cultural Mandate because it tells us that our original purpose was to create cultures, build civilizations—nothing less.”²

As stewards who are under God’s good rule in this world, we recognize this to be “a mandate” from God. That is why it is wrong for us to be idle. We are stewards who are entrusted with the care of this world. And so, in our case this morning, we steward the gifts and the abilities God gives us through our jobs and we do so for the glory of God. So our motive for being *busy at work* is not consumerism, but rather being a steward of the gifts and responsibilities God has given us all the way back at the creation of the world as we seek to partner with God in creating, sustaining and renewing things.

So as we process this command to not be idle but rather to be “*busy at work*” lets look beyond the external keeping of this command and consider what motives should be driving this command. You could be working 50 hours a week and still be “idle” if your motive is not right. You could be hustling with a full-time job and a part-time job on the side and still be “idle” if your motive is not centered in the gospel. You could be well on your way to not just making a living to get by, but building up a sizeable bank account for retirement and still be “idle” if you are busy for the wrong reasons. I want us to think about what it means to be a steward this morning.

The Opposite of Being Idle

Lets start by thinking about the opposite of being “idle.” What is it? Well, in the passage it seems that the opposite of being idle is being busy. It is hard work. It is making a living for yourself. Paul even says so much in verse 12, when he instructs them “*to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.*” That is only part of it. Motive has to be part of the answer to this question.

When Paul makes an appeal to the church at Thessalonica to not be idle, he uses himself as an example. He says in verse 7, “*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.*” As Paul was doing ministry with this church, he chose to be bi-vocational. He worked with the church and at the same time, he made tents. He supported himself. He didn’t want to be a burden to them. In verse 9 he indicated that he had the right to be supported by them, but he chose not to. And so he offers himself as an example. But what was the example? It wasn’t just that he worked hard and provided for his own means. But his motive was so “*that he might not be a burden to any of you.*” He was busy not for his own gain, but rather for their benefit.

So what then is the full picture of the opposite of being idle? It is not just being “busy.” Dorothy Sayers, in her book *Creed or Chaos?*, talks about the seven deadly sins. One of the “deadly sins” is *sloth*. That is another word you would associate with being idle. Interestingly, some believe that the word that was the precursor for “*sloth*” is a word we may not be overly familiar with as much. Some call it “the forgotten deadly sin.” It is the word “*acedia*.” Perhaps apart from the vocab part of your SAT’s you really don’t see that word much. But it is a word that means more than laziness. It means “a life driven by mere cost-benefit analysis of ‘what’s in it for me.’”³ In other words, this deadly sin is more focused on the motive for why you do what you do. In our case, we are talking about work. We are talking about being “*busy at work*.” Do you know what this means? You can be very busy and in the technical sense still “be idle.”

In fact, Dorothy Sayers says that this sin is “the sin of the empty soul” that opens the door for all the other sins to be the motivation for your work. Keller adds, “You may work exceptionally hard because of envy to get ahead of somebody, or because of pride to prove yourself, or because of greed or even gluttony for pleasure. In short, *acedia* is the most subtle idolatry of all. It puts the cynical self at the center of your life.”⁴ So when we talk about the opposite of being “idle” we are not just talking about working hard and being busy. You can be busy on the outside, but if the motive is for self, Sayers says, “it is a disguise for the empty heart and the empty brain and the empty soul of *acedia* . . . In the world it calls itself tolerance but in hell it is called despair.”⁵

So I would suggest to you that the true opposite of being idle is accepting the fact that we are stewards who are entrusted with responsibility and accountable to God for how we fulfill our responsibilities. This is what propels us to be *busy at work*. It is the stewardship of what God has given us and therefore, God is the end to which we work.

I mentioned last week how the outline of this series follows the outline of a book by Robert Alexander called *The Gospel-Centered Life at Work*. I shared with you how I was attracted to this book because of his emphasis on son, servant and steward. That is the conversation we have been having the past few years as well as we think of the way of life God has called us to. We have talked about identity, capacity and destiny. My identity is that I am a son or a daughter of God, deeply loved by God in Christ. So last week we talked about what it means to be adopted into the family of God. Therefore, because I am a son who is deeply loved by God, I now have the capacity to love others the way I have been loved. So, like Christ, I willingly take on the form of a servant in every area of life. This allows me to consider others as better than myself. But then there is a destiny piece as well. God has given us all unique gifts, abilities and responsibilities that we are to steward. Prior to this series, whenever we talked about stewarding the gifts God has given us, we often couched it in the context of our spiritual

gifts and our service in the body of Christ. Hopefully, through this series you are seeing that all of life is a stewardship and your job or your stage of life has given you unique opportunities to steward your gifts for the glory of God and the love of others. What you do Monday to Friday is just as sacred as what you are doing right now.

One of the passages that has helped me understand what it means to be a steward is Matthew 25. It is part of the Olivet Discourse. It is here where Jesus is talking about “the end of the age.” And here Jesus says no one knows “*that day and hour*” when Christ will return. The teaching of Jesus on this subject ends in Matthew 25 with three parables that tell us how we are to live now as we wait for the return of Christ.

The first parable is the Parable of the Ten Virgins. Five of them were ready when the bridegroom came and five were not. The ones who were not ready, missed him altogether. And so here is the point. As we wait for the return of Christ we need to live with a sense of expectancy so that when he comes we would be found ready and faithful. Well how do we wait? The next parable tells us how we wait. It is the Parable of the Talents. You could actually call it “the Parable of the Steward.” In this parable, the master gets ready to leave for a journey it says that he “*entrusts*” to his servants his property. They are to steward it while he is gone. They don’t receive an equal amount of responsibility. One steward received one talent, one received three and the other five. The issue was not how much they received, but rather, what they did with what they were given while the master was gone. The one who received one talent, buried his talent and did not serve his master well and when the master returned, he was held accountable. As we wait for the return of Jesus, we steward the gifts and talents and abilities God has given us to the glory of God. But what does that look like? How do we steward and invest the things God has given us to the glory of God? The final parable tells us how. It is the parable of the separation of the sheep and the goats, the final judgment. What differentiated the sheep from the goats is the way they responded in care and love for “*the least of these.*” In other words, did you use what you were entrusted with to love and serve others?

In the purest sense of the word, that is the opposite of what it means to not be idle. It is not just about “being busy” at work. Robert Alexander says it this way, “Being identified as God’s beloved frees us to put the needs of others before our own and to celebrate their strengths and accomplishments because we know we will always be taken care of by our Heavenly Father.”⁶

A Steward for the Love of God

I find it interesting that before Paul commands us to not be idle and to be “*busy at*

work” he first tells us, “*May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.*” In order for us to see our jobs as a way we steward the responsibilities God gives us, God needs to be the goal and the focus of all we do. It reminds me of 1 Corinthians 10:31, “*Whether, then you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*” Stewardship begins with recognizing that all of life is to be lived for the glory of God. If God is the focus of what I do, then I am not driven by recognition or jealousy or performance or self-advancement. Rather, I can die to those things and trust God with even the hard things of my job because I recognize that even my suffering is a way that God can be glorified through me.

I was reminded this week of a French film called *Of Gods and Men*. It is the true story of nine monks who peacefully served the largely Muslim population of this small town in Algeria in the 1990’s. At the time a civil war broke out between the government and a radical branch of Islam. During this time 70 journalists were assassinated and as the story of these monks progressed, it became rather apparent that if they didn’t flee then they too would face a similar fate. This movie captures the difficulty these men faced as they grappled with whether or not to flee or stay. They were obviously fearful over the pending circumstance and there was much debate between them as they sought direction from God in their prayers.

The most powerful scene in the movie for me was when they voted to stay. Knowing that the militant group was getting closer and the more imminent was their capture, they sat down to a meal. The scene was made to look much like “The Last Supper” of our Lord, before he voluntarily went to his death on the cross. During this scene they shared wine, listened to Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* and their faces were pictures of peace as they toasted each other. They would not leave because they were bound by their calling and because of the people they came to love. It was a picture of what it looks like to die to yourself. They were carrying out their service to God as stewards of their charge. In order to do that, they made the ultimate sacrifice. But they could do so to the glory of God because they saw themselves as stewards of God, and their motive for their service was not themselves, but ultimately it was God. In a very real way, they were free.

Now this call to “die to ourselves” will not require most of us, if not all of us, to actually surrender our lives in service to God. But it is what we are called to do daily. Speaking of the death of Jesus, John 12:24 says, “*unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*” And then he follows with the application. “*Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me.*” And how do we do that? We daily die to ourselves and as stewards we find our joy in doing all we do for the love and glory of God.

Some of you have heard me talk about Brother Lawrence before. He was a monk and his job in the monastery was to clean dishes. In his book *Practicing the Presence of God* he tells how he made it his habit to practice the presence of God while he performed the mundane task of washing the dishes. By making God the focus of this task, it changed his attitude and you can be sure those dishes were as clean as could be because he was doing his job unto God. The kitchen became the holiest and most joyful place in the entire monastery. He thought it was a shame that people pursued activities mistaking the means for the end. So why do I work? To make a living. Why do I clean dishes? It is my job and I need to contribute. But it is not a means to an end. It is an end unto itself. And so he said, “our sanctification does not depend so much on changing our activities as it does on doing them for God rather than for others.”⁷

Can you guess what the hat is for this morning? It is the San Diego Padres. The word “Padres” is Spanish for “fathers.” The city of San Diego was founded by Franciscan friars, those who gave up the things of this world to serve God. That is what a steward is. That is what we are. Even through our jobs, we are “*to direct our hearts to the love of God*” and in doing so it transforms how we view our work and how we end up doing our job. So try it tomorrow. Begin your day with a prayer that acknowledges that you are going to “wash the dishes” that is do your job to the glory of God. Do that every day next week and begin to notice how that changes how you do your work and how you engage with others and how you endure difficulty at work. Just try it.

A Steward for the Love of Others

Here is what happens. As you do your work for the glory of God, you are feeding up to love others through your job. Like Brother Lawrence, you become a transforming presence. Paul alluded to the end for which we work at the end of our passage this morning when he encouraged his readers “*to not grow weary in doing good.*” What keeps us from growing weary? Keeping our focus on serving God. What causes us to grow weary in doing good? It is when our focus is on ourselves.

I listened to a TED Talk this week and it was by Graham Hill. The premise of his talk was that less stuff leads to more happiness. While it was a purely secular talk, he was making an important cultural observation. He said, “Did you know that we Americans have about three times the amount of space we did 50 years ago? Three times. So you'd think, with all this extra space, we'd have plenty of room for all our stuff. Nope. There's a new industry in town, a 22 billion-dollar, 2.2 billion sq. ft. industry: that of personal storage. So we've got triple the space, but we've become such good shoppers that we need even more space. So where does this lead? Lots of credit card debt, huge environmental footprints, and perhaps not coincidentally, our happiness levels flat-lined

over the same 50 years.”⁸ He went on to suggest that less might actually mean more and more does not always equate to happiness. I think that is a secular way of saying that if the purpose of work is to accumulate more things for yourself, in the end it may not ultimately give you what you were looking for.

But if I view my job as something I do for the glory of God and as an opportunity to love others, then the joy of life is unending. A woman by the name of Gayln became a doctor and as she was preparing for her career she struggled for a long time as to whether or not this was how she was to steward her time and abilities. She finally concluded that God delighted in her delighting in being a doctor. Here is how she describes her job.

“It became apparent to me very early on that relationships with patients develop very quickly due to the patient’s need for my competence, confidentiality and compassion. The best thing I could offer my patients was excellence in my profession, but beyond that, I was called to serve them. The prayer I offered over my class at graduation was that we would be instruments to serve our patients and be advocates for life, not just professionals in sterile white coats. In reality, this meant walking our sick patients to and from the restroom, getting them a drink, or tying their shoelaces in clinic if they could not bend over. Caring for them meant listening well, which was often more important than a prescription. Spiritual struggles came as I learned that God controlled the eternal destiny of my patients and did not place the sole burden on my to share the gospel with every dying patient. The role of servant and advocate came so naturally for me that it reinforced the conviction of my calling.” She went on to talk about how this same care and love for others was something she would express as a mom. She concludes by saying, “My two greatest joys in life have been helping my patients and holding my own children in the middle of the night. When I’m doing these two things, the satisfaction is indescribable—honestly!”⁹

Do you hear what she is saying. When you understand what it means to be a steward who is able to serve God through your job, you are free to love others through what you do. And when that becomes the focus of your job, you are able to give yourself away time and time and again. That is more satisfying than just working for the advancement of yourself. That is what it means to steward what God has given you.

Conclusion

So yes, we are not to be idle. Yes, we are to be “*busy at work*.” But don’t forget what comes before and after these commands. It is for the love and glory of God we work and in doing so, we are able to love others through what we do. When we do that, we

are truly being good stewards of what God has given us to do. So would you consider wearing this hat this week? Die to yourself and live for God. Do what you do to the glory of God and therefore allow your job to become a place where God's love shine through you.

¹Tim Keller *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work* (New York: Dutton, 2012) 226

²Nancy Pearcey *Total Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004) 63

³Dorothy Sayers *Creed or Chaos* (Manchester, NH.: Sophia, 1949) 81

⁴Keller, 230

⁵Sayers, 82

⁶Robert Alexander *The Gospel Centered Life at Work* (Greensboro: New Growth Press) 90

⁷Blog at Word Press.com "Brother Lawrence on Prayer and Doing the Dishes"
www.thegroundbeneathyourfeet.wordpress.com July 3, 2013

⁸Graham Hill "Less Stuff, More Happiness" www.ted.com Feb. 2011

⁹Tom Nelson *Work Matters* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2011) 161-162

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Share with the group something you are looking forward to this summer.
2. Share with the group something you felt God impressed upon your heart through the sermon or some other aspect of the worship service this past Sunday.
3. It was mentioned in the sermon that there is a repetitive theme throughout this series. Our work is a way we partner with God and love others. The one variable, however, has been how the gospel motivates and empowers us to serve God and others through our jobs. Consider the following four aspects of the gospel:

Royals: "Royal Reps" transformed into the image of Christ

Twins: God at the hub of our lives enables his character to flow through us

Nationals: Adopted into the family of God and free to love

Padres: Stewards who serve to the glory of God

Which image speaks to you the most and motivates you to serve God and love others through your job?. Why?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read 2 Thessalonians 3:5-13
What are the commands in this passage?
How do verses 5 and 13 help you understand the commands?
Taking into consideration verses 5 and 13, how would you describe the opposite of being "idle?"
5. Read Matthew 25:14-30
How does this parable help you understand what it means to be a steward in God's kingdom?
How might this passage apply to your job?
6. Read 1 Corinthians 10:31
What might this verse look like as you apply it to your job?
How can you practically practice the "presence of God" in the context of your job?
What impact do you think this would have on how you approach your job?
7. Read 2 Thessalonians 5:13
What causes you to become weary in doing good?
How might doing what you do for the glory of God help you to not grow weary in loving others?

Taking It Home

8. What would you like to do this week as a result of your conversation?
Outside of this group, who can you share this with?