

Ora Et Labora

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Peter Jonker

2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

So the Thessalonian church has a problem with slackers. Some people in the church community are simply not pulling their weight. We know it's a significant problem because this is actually the second time Paul has mentioned the issue in a letter to them. He's fairly gentle in his first letter: "You should mind your own business and work with your hands (1 Thess 4:11)," and "warn those who are idle." His tone is a cheerful, "Okay everyone, let's do our part!" But the problem persists and now there's an edge. Now he's like a mother telling her son to clean up her room for the second time. "The one who is unwilling to work should not eat!" "Do not associate with believers who are living in idleness!" "They should be ashamed!" Now Paul is recommending church discipline for the slackers. It's a problem.

The question is, why were people refusing to work? It's more than simple laziness. The traditional explanation is that they thought the second coming was just around the corner. People thought that Jesus was going to return in a few weeks or a few months and so they simply stopped working and took up a life of inactive waiting. Why wear yourself out when the world was about to end at any moment? So on the face of it, the problems in the Thessalonian church are: 1. too little work and 2. too high an expectation of Jesus' return.

Doesn't it strike you that this is exactly the opposite problem from what we face today? Idleness is not our problem. I'm sure there are people in this church who need to have someone tell them to work harder, but not many. We are not slackers. I think for most of us here, we feel like we have exactly the opposite problem. We are insanely busy. There aren't enough hours in the day to do what needs doing. According to a 1999 article in the BBC, Americans work more hours in a year than any other country in the western world. We work 1966 hours a year. Compare that with the French who work 1656 and the British who work just over 1700. When we pastors hear you talk about your lives, we don't hear about boredom; we hear about exhaustion. Generally speaking, idleness is not our problem.

And as for expecting Jesus any moment, it has been almost 2000 years since the Ascension. We've been waiting for 2000 years so, if anything, our expectation of his return is weak. If we are honest, most of us do not expect him to come back in our lifetime. We're not thinking about quitting our jobs. We're not watching the heavens. We don't wake up in the morning thinking, "Is this the day?" We wake up in the morning thinking about all the things we have to do! We wake up thinking about our work! It's exactly the opposite of Thessalonica! They get up and think of Jesus' coming. We get up thinking about our work.

On the surface it seems that we could not be more different than the church of Thessalonica, but that's only on the surface. Dig a little and you'll find we share a few things. Dig for example into the word *idleness*. In the Greek, the word is *ataktos*. The idle are the *ataktos*. In the Greek, *ataktos* means a little more than to be inactive and lazy, in the Greek it also means to be disruptive. It's very likely that the inactive folks in the church weren't just idle, they were militantly idle. They were proudly idle. They were trying to convert others to their idleness.

Imagine something like this: Bob is a tailor in Thessalonica. He has a nice little business down by the docks mending sails and clothes. Six days a week he gets up before dawn and begins his work and he works steadily until late in the evening. It enables him to own a small

house for him and his family and to practice charity: he gives to the church and helps out needy neighbors when he can. Bob has been a Christian for a few years now. He heard Paul preach when he came to town and he and his whole family were baptized. The little church was the center of his life now. He loves his church family. He loves Jesus.

But there is a problem. In the congregation, there are a significant minority of people who are criticizing people like Bob. These people did not work, instead they spent every day down at the marketplace, hanging out together and singing songs about Jesus, praying, talking about how things would be when Jesus came back. They all used to have jobs. They all used to make a living with their hands just like Bob, but they abandoned all that once they became Christians. Now they lived day by day, working the system, living off charity, or as they liked to think of it, “living off the daily manna that the Lord sent.” “We live by faith!!!” they said. “We have truly let go of this world! We have set our eyes on the heavenly city! We are laying up treasures in heaven! We are the really serious Christians; we live 100% of the time for Jesus!” These people had favorite slogans: Let Go and let God! The Lord will provide! Expect a miracle! When these people said stuff like that, Bob got the distinct impression that they were also saying that Bob did not live by faith, that Bob did not live 100% of the time for Jesus. That made him feel guilty, like a second class Christian. Sometimes he wondered, “If I were a real believer, if I really relied on God, maybe I shouldn’t be in my shop all the time working on sails; maybe all that work means I’m earthly minded. Does Jesus want me to quit my job and spend my time singing and praying all the time? Is my faith weak and wimpy?” These inactive Christians were *ataktos* in the full sense of the word: they weren’t just idle, they were disruptive. They were – to use the words of verse 11 – busybodies. They were insinuating their views into the church, making their idleness into a virtue, a badge of honor, a sign of faith.

So when Paul comes crashing down on these people in these verses, he’s fighting something spiritually significant. This is not a passage which is meant to make unemployed people feel guilty. This is not a passage that a Christian can use against government policies of social assistance – Paul is not speaking out against welfare. He’s not calling us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Paul is speaking against a distortion of the Christian faith. Paul is speaking against a kind of spirituality that pits work against faith, like they are opposing forces. Paul is speaking out against a kind of piety that says the more spiritual you are the less you’re involved with human effort, the less you depend on human work.

And this spiritual distortion isn’t just a Thessalonian thing; it’s something that’s always shown up in the church. A sort of extreme modern example of this is people who rely completely on faith for their healing. There are Christian people who reject the working of conventional medicine and choose instead to rely on faith to heal them. People who seek the help of doctors have insufficient faith; if you trusted God you would bring your problem to him in prayer with no secular backup plan to fall back on, you would prove you had faith and your faith would make you well. That’s a pretty extreme stance. I don’t think anyone here would go that far. But it’s a modern way in which people set faith in Jesus over against hardworking human hands.

You sometimes see this same dynamic in church work. In seminary, there was a fellow student who didn’t think you shouldn’t prepare too much for sermons. You should just pray for the Spirit to give you the right words. If you worked too hard on your sermons you weren’t showing enough faith. I remember talking to a person on a search committee for a church. The committee had done a lot of work looking for the right person for their congregation. They’d solicited names from the congregation. They’d listened to sermons. They’d talked to references. They’d read ministerial profiles. Traditional search committee work. But then one of the

members was travelling and happened to get into a conversation with a stranger who turned out to be a Christian Reformed minister looking for a call. They had a lovely talk and when he told the committee about the encounter they all agreed that this was the Holy Spirit showing them who they should call. Now I have no problem with them seeing the Spirit in this encounter. I do have a problem with the implication that the Spirit wasn't in their regular work. Like God only works through strange coincidences, like regular human work couldn't be Spirit-filled and Spirit-led. It's a way of setting work over against faith.

Sometimes prayer itself becomes a pious substitute for hard work. Tony Campolo tells the story of a time when he went to a conference where there were a whole bunch of Christian people together to study and worship – there might have been 500 people there. At one of the sessions that he was leading, a person came forward and said that he had an urgent prayer request. Some mission person well known to the conference attendees had run into a problem and needed to pay \$6000 or they would lose their ministry. Everyone said, "We should pray about this, let's have a time of prayer, let's pray that God might deliver him from this situation." Campolo stood up at that point and said something like, "We don't need a prayer right now; we need a collection! Grab some baskets, let everyone search their heart and see what they can give, and let's see if we can help this man." A half an hour later they had more than enough to cover the debt. I imagine they still prayed that day, only it was a prayer of thanksgiving for God's provision. I'm sure the people at the conference were good, hardworking people, but they were unintentionally doing exactly what the Thessalonians did. It is a mistake to spend all your time in acts of piety and devotion when what God needs is hard work.

Of course the opposite is true too. It is wrong to spend all your time in frantic work when what God needs from you are acts of piety and devotion. And while Paul warns the idle Thessalonians against too much prayer and pious talk, and not enough action, I wonder if he were writing the first letter to the LaGravers, would he warn us against idleness? Probably not. Everyone is different of course, but for us the danger isn't too much pious talk and not enough work, our problem is not that we are letting go and expecting God to take care of everything, if anything our problem is the opposite. Our problem is that we rely on our own strength, our own smarts, our own resources our own energy to solve our problems, and we don't really expect God to do anything. It's not only that we don't expect the second coming; we don't really expect any kind of coming, any kind of intervention from the living God. We think, if we don't do it, it won't happen at all. That's my spiritual danger.

To address this spiritual tension, the church fathers talked about *ora et labora*. Those are Latin words that mean prayer(*ora*) and work (*labora*). We need both together they said. The Thessalonians had too much *ora* and not enough *labora*, but we probably have too much *labora* and not enough *ora*. Paul's vision is hardworking hands and warm piety together. When both *ora* and *labora* are present and balanced in a life, that life preaches the gospel.

A middle aged woman works in a busy office environment. She's super vocal about her faith. She's not afraid to name Jesus in her daily conversations. She leads an office prayer gathering on Wednesday mornings. She's a "Hallelujah praise the Lord" kind of person. But she's not just talk! She excels in her work, she's accomplished and professional. Her faith gets from her mouth to her hands: When a frazzled coworker is cursing over a car that won't start in the parking lot at the end of a busy day she'll be the first to stop and help and offer a ride, offer a jump start. When she hears of a coworker who's having a hard time, she's the first to show up with a meal. *Ora* and *Labora* in balance. That person's life preaches a gospel. God reveals himself in a life like that.

Or there's the Christian scholar at a big research university. He's published ground breaking work in the best journals. He gets invited to speak at the really big conferences. He's written learned books with long Latin footnotes. His work is admired by his students and envied by his peers. And yet when a troubled student unloads in his office, he is ready to ask if he could pray with him. And at the weekly gathering of Christian students and faculty on campus, he can be seen singing with everything he has, his arms open to heaven. And on Wednesday he spends an hour teaching English to immigrant children. They have no idea he's some big shot academic. They think he's a nice guy. Ora and labora in balance. A person looks at a life like that and they see Jesus. It's lives like this, lives of ora and labora that make us say I want to follow Jesus.

And it is precisely Jesus whom these lives follow. Jesus lived an ora and labora kind of life. Jesus' salvation was a work of words and supernatural power, but it was also the work of sweat and human perseverance. Jesus worked in the trenches. There were long nights with nowhere to sleep. There were dusty days traveling many miles. There were crowds always, pushing at him and pawing at him. Jesus didn't save this world from the safety of an ivory tower. His hands would have been callused from the work in his earthly father's carpenter shop. And, of course, his hands would have been worn from the work he did for his heavenly Father. His hands would have born the marks of his work on the cross – ora and labora for us and our salvation.

Every part of our life shines with the glory of God! The transcendent worship. The gritty work of our hands. It's all holy. It's all beautiful. It all belongs to God.

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