

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
July 25, 2010

God's Own Faithfulness

2 Thessalonians 3:1-15

Key verse: "The Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one" (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

I once heard a story about a mother who walked into her six-year-old son's room and found him sobbing.

"What's the matter," she asked.

"I've just figured out how to tie my shoes," said the boy.

"Well, honey," said his mother, "that's wonderful."

The wise mother recognized in her son the developmental struggle of autonomy versus self-doubt. "You're growing up," she said, "but why are you crying?"

"Because," he said, "now I'll have to tie them every day for the rest of my life!"

The necessity of daily routine and the importance of work—it is one thing when a six-year-old doesn't understand these life truths. It is another thing entirely when adults won't live by them.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:1-15, the apostle Paul addresses an urgent problem in the Thessalonian church. Certain church members had decided not to work any longer but, instead, to wait idly for the return of Christ. "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" (v. 6).

Paul addresses this issue forcefully. He reminds them of his own example: "For 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" (vv. 7-9). Paul would have agreed with the wisdom of an African chief who said, "A good example is the tallest kind of preaching."

To further emphasize his point, Paul gives this practical rule: "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (v. 10). Finally, he tells the church that if the idle members refuse to work, the other believers should "have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed" (v. 14).

If this action sounds too severe, we should remember, first, that the purpose of such church discipline was ultimately to restore its recipients to a right relationship

with the Lord and the church: “Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers” (v. 15). Second, Paul evidently saw the continuation of this laziness and idleness as a threat to the witness of the early Christian movement.

Still today, how we do our work is an important part of our Christian witness to a watching world. Bible scholar William Barclay wrote: “A tree is known by its fruits and a person is known by his work. Once, a man was negotiating to buy a house. He bought it without even seeing it. He was asked why he took such a risk. His answer was, ‘I know the man who built that house and he builds his Christianity in with the bricks.’ The Christian, just because he is a Christian, should be a better workman than anyone else.” (*The Daily Study Bible Series*)

The London Institute of Contemporary Christianity reported the following data concerning *work* in the Bible:

Of Jesus’ 132 public appearances in the New Testament, 122 were in the marketplace.

Of 52 parables Jesus told, 45 had a workplace context.

Jesus spent his adult life as a carpenter, until age 30 when he went into a preaching ministry in the workplace.

Work is worship: The Hebrew word avodah is the root for the word from which we get the words work and worship.

Work in its different forms is mentioned more than 800 times in the Bible, more than all the words used to express worship, music, praise, and singing combined.

As we think about applying Paul’s admonitions regarding work and idleness, we ought also to remember this: Many people today are out of work, not because they don’t want a job but because a job is not immediately available for them.

Unemployment is a problem in our society, and it takes a heavy toll on its victims. Those people among us who can’t secure a job in our current economy deserve our prayers and support, not our blame.

This passage from 2 Thessalonians 3 has some important things to say to us about the importance of a Christian work ethic. In addition, these verses remind us of (1) *the importance of praying for your pastor* and (2) *the centrality of God’s faithfulness*.

1. The importance of praying for your pastor. Paul makes a strong appeal to the church at Thessalonica to uphold him and his ministry in prayer. “Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you, and that we may be rescued from wicked and evil people; for not all have faith” (vv. 1-2).

Some years ago, I had the privilege of studying under Bible scholar, Dr. Merrill Tenney. Dr. Tenney once said, “If a church wants a better pastor, it can get one by praying for the one it has.” Pray for your pastor!

2. The centrality of God's faithfulness. The Bible sometimes reminds God's people of our obligations and responsibilities. In this passage, for example, we are reminded of our responsibility to have a strong work ethic as a witness to others and of our responsibility to pray for pastors and other spiritual leaders. However, God's call for us to live faithfully is always given in the context of *God's faithfulness to us*. God's faithfulness to us calls forth our faithfulness to live for Him. Also, we can live faithfully for God only by the grace and strength that God so faithfully provides.

So, we end this commentary with these words of encouragement: "But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one" (v. 3). "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ" (v. 5).

Thanks be to God!

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