

## Work While You Wait

2 Thessalonians 3.6-13

Jesus is coming, but we don't know when. An issue that came up in Thessalonica and still matters today, was 'What do we do while we wait?' Some decided to shift their lives into neutral and do nothing. Bad idea. This is our time...time to work.

Unlocking this Passage

- 6a Command in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (avoid the lazy)
- 6b Problem: Lack of discipline
- 6c The Rule (General)
  - 7-9 The Example: Paul and the apostles
  - 10 The Rule (Specified)
  - 11 Problem: Lack of discipline
- 12 Command in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (don't be lazy)

Lessons: Why should we work?

- To support *yourself* (no work, no eat!) (8, 10)
- To submit to Christ (6, 12; Col. 3.23-24)
- To show godly character (6-7, 11)
- To support *others* (doing good) (13)

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Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.

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In the early 1800s a Baptist farmer from upstate New York named William Miller became fascinated with Bible prophecy. The French Revolution and events in America had aroused the interest of many in the second coming. After studying Bible prophecy for more than a decade, Miller announced he had discovered when Christ would return to the earth. During the 1830s, he traveled around preaching his message, and by the early 1840s, nearly a million people had attended camp meetings and heard him speak. Tens of thousands believed his message. Miller said Jesus was going to return in April, 1843, and

that all “worthy people” would ascend into heaven on October 23, 1844. Thousands of Christians left their churches to follow Miller, hoping to be found ‘worthy’ when Jesus returned. (Some believed that citizens of the United States were God’s chosen people and would all be saved. Similar thinking gave rise to British Israelism and Mormonism.) For many working-class people, eking out a meagre living, the message of an escape from their toil and hardship was too good to ignore. Many quit their jobs, sold their possessions, and on Oct. 23<sup>rd</sup> dressed in white robes and sat on rooftops or hilltops to be first to go when Jesus returned. October 23<sup>rd</sup> came and went; Jesus didn’t come. Miller quickly issued a new date for the second coming about six months later. Again, nothing happened. Miller died a few years later, but his followers kept going, and started the Seventh Day Adventist cult.

This kind of thing still happens. Nine years ago, Christian radio broadcaster Harold Camping predicted that Christ would return on May 21, 2011. Billboards announced it. Believers quit their jobs, sold their possessions, and traveled the country putting up banners and handing out fliers. Some bought expensive RVs and decked them out with the message. When May 21<sup>st</sup> passed, he changed the date to October 21, 2011. Wrong again. Camping died in 2013 before he could make any more guesses. Hollywood loves this stuff: Homer Simpson predicted the end of the world. Don’t be shocked if others do.



Now most of you probably don’t get up in the morning expecting Jesus to return on that day. It’s not that you’re not looking forward to it, but you know Scripture, and it tells us it will come ‘like a thief in the night’ – without warning. True, the events of this year, and uncertainty about the future, have caused many of us to think about Christ’s return. I believe it may be soon, but people have been expecting Jesus to return for centuries. In fact, they expected it in the first century.

The Apostle Paul did. In 1 Thess. 1.10, he commends the Christians because they are waiting expectantly for Jesus to return from heaven (1.10). He believes it will be soon; he writes, *we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord* in 1 Thess. 4.15. In 2 Thess. 1.7 he says Jesus is going to be revealed from heaven and give them relief from their persecution. This was a *real expectation* for them. In Titus 2.13, he writes that grace teaches us to be *looking for that blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus*.

There’s nothing wrong with expecting Christ to return, and looking forward to it. I sure am! But there is a danger here: Some of the Christians in Thessalonica had reacted badly to this expectation. They’re so inspired by Christ’s return that they spend more and more time talking about it. They become so preoccupied with the second coming that thinking and talking about it becomes a major part of their lives. They miss work here and there at first, but before long these *devotees* of the second coming stop working altogether. *After all, if the Rapture will happen soon, what could be more spiritual than devoting yourself completely to looking for it?*

Soon, these Rapture-enthusiasts view themselves as more spiritual than others. *What's wrong with those others who go on living their lives like nothing is about to happen?!* They begin to go from house-to-house, telling others how they should join them. *If you really believed Jesus was coming, you'd join us in waiting for Him.*

Since they had stopped working to devote themselves to their misguided devotion, they began stopping by homes at dinner time. After all, they were so spiritual, surely the others could provide them with a few meals.

Some may have become a public nuisance, going around and announcing Jesus' return. Instead of attracting people to Christ, they repelled them. Instead of good news, they gave doom and gloom. Paul had to step in.

### Unlocking this Passage

- 6a Command in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (avoid the lazy)
- 6b Problem: Lack of discipline
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The key to unlocking this passage is its hidden structure. Verses 6-12 form a chiasm, a literary tool common in ancient writings. I've outlined it for you on your study sheets, but you can see it easily if you look at your Bible.

Paul begins in v6 with the phrase, *Now we command you, brethren, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ...* Now go down to v12: *Now such persons we command and exhort*

*in the Lord Jesus Christ...* The first thing that stands out here is the seriousness of what Paul is writing. The word for *command* (παραγγέλλω, *paraggéllō*) is a term used in military or court settings – orders that are absolute. Here the command is given with the authority of Jesus Christ. To disobey this order is to disobey your Lord and Master, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

We can now fill in the subsequent stages: In the second line of v6, Paul identifies the problem: It was someone (a Christian – “every brother”) *who leads an unruly life*. In v11, Paul addresses this problem person again: *...some among you are leading an undisciplined life*. This is a poor translation: Both *unruly* in v6, and *undisciplined* in v11, come from the same Greek word, ἀτάκτως (*atáktōs*), referring to someone who is idle and irresponsible. Paul makes this clear in the second half of v11: *doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies*.

Notice here that the problem is not someone who is out of a job. It is someone who chooses to not take a job that is offered to him. They may want a certain kind of job, or a job that pays a certain amount, or they may just be lazy. The bottom line: *Any able-bodied Christian who chooses to be idle and eat the fruit of someone else's sweat is in rebellion against God*.

This is God's decree. Before the fall, God provided for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. All they had to do was pick and eat. But when sin entered the human race, God put us under a curse: *By the sweat of your face you will eat bread until you return to the ground* (Gen. 3.19). We chose to go against God, to rely on ourselves instead

of relying on Him, so He said, “OK, have it your way!” Work is a condition of hardship God imposed on humans to remind us that sin is a burden – it is not the way God planned it. But until God brings in the new heavens and the new earth, this is how it is.

That leads to the next stage in Paul’s argument: The rule by which they are supposed to live. He alludes to it at the end of v6: *the tradition which you received from us* – that is, what Paul taught them. He spells it out in v10: *when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.*

People often stop in to the church office with stories of need – food, gas, or rent. Recently a young man stopped by and asked for assistance. On three different occasions, we helped him. The fourth time he came by, I asked him why he didn’t have a job. He replied, *I have my reasons.* He said he was ‘one of God’s sheep,’ and that Christians were supposed to take care of each other. When I said we couldn’t help him anymore, he became belligerent: *Are you saying that God is telling you not to give me money?* I said, “Yes.” He walked away shaking his head. But he was disobeying God’s rule: No work, No eat.

Finally, we arrive at middle part of this chiasm in vv7-9, the ‘centerpiece’ of Paul’s argument. Linguistic scholars say this is where the author pauses, as it were, to develop his point. Paul uses this central section of his argument to remind them of his example: When he was with them, he didn’t sit around doing nothing; he worked to pay his own way so he wouldn’t be a burden to them.

Now as we look at the passage, we see the progression: Paul commands them in the name of Jesus Christ to not associate with Christians who don’t work, and Christians who aren’t working to get to work. He calls this problem what it is – a lack of discipline. He gives the rule – which he had taught them when he was with them: *You don’t work, you don’t eat.* His actions matched his words.

“OK,” you say, “some Christians in Thessalonica weren’t working, and Paul tells them to; what difference does this make to us today?” It matters because in these verses are four reasons why work is important in each of our lives.

#### Lessons: Why should we work?

- To support *yourself* (no work, no eat!) (8, 10)

The first reason is the most obvious: You work to support yourself. This was the apostles’ example; as Paul says in v8, *we didn’t eat anyone’s bread without paying for it.* V10 turns that into a command: *If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.* No work, no eat!

I think this passage was one of my dad’s favorites. I grew up on a small farm just outside Portland, Oregon. Anyone old enough to do chores did some. I got up at six o’clock in the morning to feed the chickens or rabbits, and when I was older, to milk a cow. Every morning and night, rain or shine, I did chores, and the rule of our house was, *You don’t eat until you do your chores.* You didn’t come to the table until you had done your work. *No work, no eat. Even if you’re a child, you contribute. After all, parents are paying all the bills; the least you can do is pitch in.*

I have a confession to make: I *never* remember thanking my father for making us do chores every day. But today I do. He gave me a work ethic. In today's society, as was true when Paul was writing to the Thessalonians, some were not contributing. This is not God's will.

Calvin Miller tells a parable of a king who commanded his wise men to distill all human wisdom into a small and manageable writing. After working for 12 years, they brought him 12 volumes. "Too big," he said. "Condense it more." They spent another year and came back with a single volume. "Still too big," the king said. "Condense it further!" The next day the wise men came back with one line written on a piece of paper: "There is no free lunch." We work to eat.

- To submit to Christ (6, 12; Col. 3.23-24)

The second reason why working is important is because it shows our submission to Christ. In other words, we do it willingly because He is our *real* boss, our ultimate Master. Paul's commands are not on his own authority; in vv6 and 12 it is on Christ's authority. Listen to what he wrote in Colossians 3.23-24:

*Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.*

We get paid money by our earthly bosses. The reward we will receive for doing our work well from the Lord is far greater. *It is ultimately the Lord Christ whom you serve.*

We see this clearly in Scripture: Work is one of the most God-like things we can do. In Genesis, God worked six days before He rested. When He created man, He said, "Let us make man in Our image" (Gen. 1.27). When we work, we reflect His image.

Consider Jesus: He worked as a carpenter. His disciples worked as fishermen. When the Pharisees criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, He replied, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working" (Jn. 5.17).

We reflect the example of God and submit to Jesus Christ – and one day be rewarded by Him for doing so – when we work.

- To show godly character (6-7, 11)

Third, it follows that working shows godly character, and laziness reflects ungodliness. Verses 6, 7, and 11 all refer to those who won't work as ἀτάκτως – irresponsible, idle, and undisciplined. Again, this is not talking about those who are unable to work because no jobs are available, or they don't have the necessary qualifications, both those who don't like their job, or it doesn't pay enough, or like some Christians in Thessalonica who were waiting for Jesus to return, they just don't want to.

This is why the promotion of welfare is so destructive to society. It's not because it costs too much, or even that it isn't needed in some cases. It is because welfare runs counter to everything necessary for humans to live a happy, fulfilled life.

You want to show godly character at work? Put joy into it. Scripture says, *do your work heartily*. The Greek word translated *heartily* is ψυχῇ, from which we get our English word *psyche*. It refers to our *soul* or our *inner self*. One translation reads, “work at it with enthusiasm” (NET); another “put yourselves into it” (NRSV); another “Work hard and cheerfully at all you do” (LB).

Let me put that another way: *Take pride in your work*. You may think your work is nothing special: Make it something special. A sign on a septic tank truck read, “We’re #1 in the #2 business.” A plumber’s ad read, “We repair what your husband fixed.” On the door of a plastic surgeon: “Hello. Can we pick your nose?” The motto of a towing company was: “We don’t charge an arm and a leg. We want tows.” (Think about it.)

What I’m saying is this: *Whatever you do*, do it heartily as unto the Lord. Do it with enthusiasm and joy.

- To support *others* (doing good) (13)

Finally, we work not only to support ourselves, but to support others. After his tough and uncompromising commands to shun people who won’t work, Paul adds v13: *But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good*. In other words, in addition to working so you won’t be a burden to others, also set some aside so you *can be* a blessing to others.

Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.”

Here at NBBC, we have a benevolence fund that is used for helping those who are needy. We provide a building where children’s ministry and youth ministry and Bible studies are held. We partner with missionaries who are sharing the gospel and showing God’s love in places all around the world. How do we do this? By working at jobs so that not only do we support ourselves, we are able to support others.

### Conclusion

I doubt anyone here is so convinced the Rapture is about to happen that you’ve quit your job and are just whiling away the time like some Christians in Thessalonica did.

But there’s a message in this passage we all need to hear: While we are waiting for Jesus Christ to come and take us to be with Him, He has a command for us: *Work while you wait!* Work so you can support yourself, and support others, too. Work with your heavenly Master in mind, and do it with joy.

## Digging Deeper

1. The message of these verses isn't in doubt, it's just unpopular! But like so many things that 'on the surface' fly in the face of present thinking, we find that obeying God's will results in joy. Paul 'bookends' this passage (vss. 6, 12) with a command from Christ. How are the two commands different? How are they the same? What is the common theme?
2. We don't like to admit it, but Christians often – both in the first century, and today – live ungodly lives. Some in Thessalonica were doing this. The Greek word translated 'unruly' is ἀτάκτως (*atáktōs*; the same root is translated 'undisciplined' in vv7, 11). It only occurs in the Thessalonian letters in the New Testament (see also 1 Th. 5.14), and clearly refers to those who are idle or lazy (cf. v.11); they aren't working. The Thessalonian Christians were facing persecution, and anxiously and expectantly awaiting Christ's return. How might these circumstances have played into some immature believers living unproductive lives?
3. The interpretation of this passage is clear, but the application of its teachings is more difficult. NBBC has a Benevolence Fund which is used to help those in need. What conditions does this passage suggest for those being helped? How would you judge those worthy of receiving assistance, and those not? What does v13 suggest should be our overriding purpose in this regard? What other NT teachings and principles can you think of that touch on this issue?
4. It's often been observed that we live in an 'entitlement culture.' Politicians can't promise enough 'free stuff' today; a socialist mindset that government should provide all our needs has taken hold. Ironically, God *never* promises this. He *gives* eternal life as a *free gift*, but calls for labor, endurance, and sacrifice as we live our lives. Our rewards are not always experienced in this life, but are assured in heaven. Reflect on our national descent into a greed-driven and lazy 'entitlement' culture, and ways in which we as Christians can confront it.

In a nutshell, Paul emphatically declares in these verses that as Christians await Christ's return for them, they are not to get lazy. There are to be no 'free-loaders' in the body of Christ! How this had become a problem in Thessalonica we aren't sure, but it evidently had arisen very early, since Paul alluded to it in his first letter to them (4.11-12; 5.14a). But it is now a major problem, and requires intense and impassioned instruction.

Paul sternly commands Christians to "keep away from" (στέλλεσθαι = to shun, avoid; see similar meaning in v.14, μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι αὐτῷ, "do not associate with him") any brother – that is, fellow-Christian – 'who leads an unruly life.' "Unruly" translates Gk. ἀτάκτως (vv. 7, 11; cf. 1 Th. 5.14), and refers to general insubordinate or undisciplined behavior, but is only used in the Thessalonian letters in the NT and clearly refers to those who are idle and lazy (cf. v.11); they aren't working. 'Don't hang out with those losers!'

The apostolic example was the opposite (7-9): They didn't sponge off the Thessalonian Christians; they worked hard (8; cf. 1 Th. 2.9; perhaps tentmaking; Acts 18.3) and 'paid their own way.' They might have claimed the right to be supported (9; cf. 1 Cor. 9.1-18), but chose instead to be an example of how they should live.

They backed up their actions with explicit teaching: "If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either" (10). This instruction is reflected throughout Scripture, and flies in the face of the 'entitlement culture' in modern American culture. Paul's command to these parasitic leeches (11) is blunt: "Get to work, and support yourself!" (12)

After this harsh command to avoid lazy, dependent Christians, Paul wants to make sure we don't become stingy or uncaring toward those in need. So, addressing hard-working, honest Christians ("But as for you"), he reminds them to never grow weary or get tired (ἐγκακέω; to lose one's motivation to accomplish some valid goal) of doing good (in this context, for helping those in real need).