

Some in the Thessalonian church were not working for their living, when they could have been. The apostle Paul had encountered this when first in the city, had addressed then and in his first letter to the church. But the problem had continued and he must now address it again in this second letter. He instructs the church on how to discipline those who are “idle” and “disorderly”, but the discipline is based upon the divine standard for work which he had modeled and taught while with the Thessalonians, and now commanded again in even stronger terms. To work for one’s own living is right and good in God’s sight and the norm which God has established. Paul teaches this in three ways.

I. The divine rightness of work was taught by obligatory example (3:7–9).

1. *Paul reminds them of how he had lived among them (3:7b–8b).*
 - a. Unlike the “idle” in the church, he, Silas and Timothy had not been idle.
 - b. Paul explains that they had worked for their own food, revealing to us that this was part of the problem with the “idle.”
 - c. The missionaries had engaged in physically exhausting work for longer hours than usual.
2. *Paul explains three reasons why he had lived that way (3:8c–9).*
 - a. He worked because he chose not to be a burden (3:8c). This also implies that the “idle” were unnecessarily burdening others in the church. (See 1 Timothy 5:3–16 for Paul’s instructions on which widows to support.)
 - b. He worked because he chose to give up his rights (3:9a). Elsewhere he (and Jesus) taught that those who work for spiritual benefit can receive material reimbursement (Luke 10:7; 1 Timothy 5:18; 1 Corinthians 9:3–14). This condemned the “idle” who had no right to support. Since Paul would not have replaced something which God said was right with something not right, it further revealed how divinely right work is. See also Genesis 2:15.
 - c. He worked because he chose to provide a model for them imitate. His model showed that work was good and God’s intention, despite conflicting cultural attitudes. Because his model was done by choice, and not obligation, it was that much more forceful.
3. *Paul reminds them of their obligation to follow his example (3:7a).*

Working is not an equal alternative to getting handouts. As an “obligation” it is something approved and required by God. Those who can work, should work. To avoid work, when you can work, is disobeying God.

II. The divine rightness of work was taught by precept (3:10).

1. Paul had taught them a “rule” (“command”) to follow, underscoring the obligation of the model.
2. The rule — “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” — is not merely a statement of cause and effect, but dictates that if a person chooses not to work (when they could), that person should not be given food to eat. Being a “rule” or God reveals that work is right before God and is the basis for the discipline which He requires of the “idle.”

III. The divine rightness of work was taught by direct command (3:11–12).

1. Some in the church at Thessalonica were not busy working, but were busy-bodying. They could have been working.
2. The earlier “soft” admonition (1 Thessalonians 5:14), now becomes much stronger statement.
 - a. Paul himself now commands it (rather than just encouraging the Thessalonians to admonish the “idle”).
 - b. Paul now “commands and beseeches” rather than just gently “admonishing.”
 - c. Paul now commands “in the Lord Jesus Christ,” reminding them of their union in Christ and the consequent necessity of acting in a way for the benefit of the Body of Christ.
3. His command/exhortation was to “settle down” (NIV) or “work quietly” (ESV), that is, stop being the busybody and instead be busy working; and to eat their own bread, that is, stop seeking food from others and work so as to buy one’s own food.

Paul had taught by example, precept, and command that God considered work to be right and good. Though the toil and hardship of work increased because of God’s curse upon Adam’s rebellion, and though it continues today (Genesis 3:17–19; Romans 8:19–22), the believer in Jesus Christ can rejoice in eternal life because the death penalty for rebellion against God has been paid by Jesus. And the believer can join creation in “eager expectation” of the future restoration of all things to a right relationship to God. In the meantime we recognize the effects of sin on work, but accept it as part of what God is doing now. We thank God for the provision of work, pray for those who need it, strive to be workers that bring glory to God, and help those who cannot work. Work is good and right in the eyes of God, and we may glorify Him through it.