

Amputate at the Neck
Second Thessalonians 3:6-13
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After the first time I dropped out of college, I landed a job as a waiter in a chain of restaurants in the southern United States called The Waffle House. The Waffle House is a diner-style place known not only for its waffles, but also for its hashed brown potatoes which you can order scattered, smothered, covered, chunked, and several other ways, one of the finest twentieth century contributions to American cuisine. For the Waffle House deprived, scattered means scattered on the grill rather than cooked in a nice looking ring, smothered means cooked up with onions added in, covered means covered with a slice of cheese melted on top, and chunked means with chunks of ham. At the Waffle House, I worked the night shift, from 10:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m., and learned that although there are at least as many variations on human behavior as Waffle House hash browns, many of them lessons in deviant human behavior, you still have to serve them all in a timely fashion or you don't get a tip. Restaurant work is hard work. One of my most vivid memories came on my first night at work. I was working really hard, sweating even, trying to impress both the customers and the company on my very first shift, and, to tell you the truth, I thought I was making a pretty good impression. At least until the end of the shift, when the cook, an older guy named Chuck, came up to

me and said, “I don’t care what anyone else says about you, I think you do good work.” As the saying goes, “With friends like that, who needs enemies.”

Well, despite Chuck’s humorous attempt to undermine my confidence, we did become friends and even roommates when he needed a place closer to Waffle House #487. I came to know Chuck as a walking repository of humor. He knew more jokes and quips and one-liners and puns and riddles than anyone I’ve ever come across. Even our own David Garrett couldn’t hold a candle to Chuck. But of all the things Chuck said during the time we worked and lived together, the one that has stuck with me the most was his classic one liner, whenever someone complained about some rather vague or mild ache or pain, especially when it came with a hint that the injured party might have to miss work: “Looks like we’ll have to amputate at the neck.” Far from the old saying that “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop,” Chuck knew well that the idleness that really mattered was located in the mind, not the hands.

“For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work,” writes the Apostle Paul rather directly with none of Chuck’s humor. Actually, that may not be entirely true. If we were able to read Greek, we’d see in verse 11, where that comment makes its appearance, a pretty clever and pointed play on words coming from the Apostle’s pen. It seems Paul takes the word “work” and gives it a little twist to suggest that rather than working, as in laboring, they are simply working mischief, what our translation tonight calls being

a busybody. It really should be translated a little more strongly, since what Paul is suggesting is not only that they are not working to put food on their own tables, but that they are actually working against the witness of Christ's table, at which he reminded his disciples that he would give his very body and blood, and at which they found the grace which was to shape the lives of his followers ever after.

This is what was going on. There were some in the church in Thessalonica who believed strongly, maybe too strongly, in the kind of stuff we read about in Luke, that Jesus would be coming back quite soon, any day really. And these types began to take some rather extreme steps of preparation, including it seems, giving up their work so that they might be ever watchful for Christ's coming. Some commentators suggest that there may even have been some spiritual one-upsmanship going on here, that those who had decided to stop working were trying to play themselves off as more spiritual than the rest. *They* were really trusting in God. *They* really had a keener sense of Christ's return. And so there were a number of issues at stake. At one level, this attitude was creating a division in the church, as self-righteousness tends to do. No one likes to be considered a second-class citizen, especially if they really are pulling their wait, and faithfully following the tradition that had been handed down to them. And this is the kind of destructive division Paul always tried to make right because he knew just how hard it was to keep the church going even under the best of circumstances. So he pulls out the big guns of his spiritual authority and commands them to get busy and stop being idle.

Now, you may remember that commanding people to do things was not really Paul's preferred style. When he wrote to Philemon requesting leniency on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus, Paul says, in essence, I could command you to treat him well, because I have that authority, but instead, I am appealing to you. That should give you some sense of how serious was this matter in Thessalonica, so serious that he acts like a military commander. The word that gets translated here as idle was most often used in a military setting to indicate a level of disorder that was close to tragic. The word used describes the state of complete un-readiness, unfitness for duty. And thus the command to shape us.

If that were not bad enough, there is the matter of what happens to the families of those whose breadwinners decide to no longer bring home the bread. The lives of whole families and their dependents were being affected, and perhaps they were even becoming dependent on those who were still working, creating an additional burden on the whole community. Who was going to let their brother or sister in the faith, much less their children, starve or be turned out onto the street, when so much emphasis was placed in the early church on the sharing of everything. Indeed, perhaps it was that very aspect of that community's life that even made it possible for people to think about packing it all in. Maybe they thought they had the perfect situation, surrounded by generous people from whom they could take and take and take. And if that's the case, as Paul says about as plainly as it can be said, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat." End of story.

And if that weren't bad enough, there were the public opinion polls that showed the church's favorability rating in Thessalonica dropping faster than a politician caught in a scandal. Or something like that. You see, the church is, and always has been, judged on the basis of the perception of its integrity to its core beliefs, especially when viewed by those on the outside. So here we have a group of people who are looking for all the world like the very opposite of what Jesus called them to be. With all due respect to the story of Mary and Martha, and Jesus' positive comments on Mary's posture at his feet while Martha hurried about in the kitchen, there is also Jesus' threefold command to Peter to "feed my sheep." Among this idle group, there was no one turning the other cheek, handing over a tunic, or walking an extra mile with another's burden. There was no caring for widows and orphans. There was no feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, and all the rest. Instead, there were a bunch of anxious hotheads gazing at their navels expecting other people to care for them. How was that going to look to those who might have a passing interest in the church of Jesus Christ? How was that going to fly when it came time for the Roman government to decide which group to scapegoat when they needed a boost in the polls? And so Paul lays into them with his first century version of "Who do you people think you are? Better than the rest of us, eh? Spiritual giants? Maybe in your own minds! Well, just get over your bad selves! And get back to work."

Taken all together, it seems pretty clear that Paul's command to work has more to do with the effect of the idleness on the work of God rather than on some idea of fairness. This is not some attempt at welfare reform or getting people off the dole. There were probably already too many people who really could not work for legitimate reasons, for the lack of work, for being disabled, for family obligations, whatever the reason. And so for these idlers to voluntarily choose not to work was just too much, a slap in the face to those who could not work, and to the God who had called them to care for those who really were in dire straights. "Looks like we'll have to amputate at the neck," Chuck would say.

As usual, Paul comes through with a punch line that helps us put the controversies of his time into perspective in our own. "Do not be weary," he says, "Do not be weary in doing what is right." This is the part of tonight's passage that rings truer in today's church than the command to get a job. If anything, these days we are more likely to work too hard than to not work enough. Paul's people had their social conditioning, we have ours. We feel shame having to ask for help, rather than taking advantage of the generosity of others. We run ourselves ragged rather than risk being seen as a slacker. Our whole culture is built around work and achieving and productivity. Our identities are so wrapped up in it, our very names often reflect it. We have to tell people to work less, not more, to be able to avoid division in the church, and to spare their families hardship, and to give a good testimony to the grace of Jesus Christ. And perhaps for those very reasons, ironic

as it sounds, we too need to hear Chuck's refrain: "Looks like we'll have to amputate at the neck."

There is a happy medium between the extremes of the all out contemplation of the glory of the Lord and the complete neglect of it in our 110% workweek. We will do no one, least of all ourselves, any good by being either too idle or too busy to do right. I think that happy medium is somewhere right around those points of weariness and doing right that Paul describes. You see, there ought to be a creative tension between resting and striving, a creative tension that leads us toward the positive ends of harmony in the church, bringing blessing to others, and offering a good testimony of Christ, rather than the mischief-making negative forms Paul was warning against. These are the measure of "doing right," and when we get too close to either the point of doing too little to achieve those ends or doing too much and frustrating those ends is when we need to be reminded to plunge in again or to back off a little. Where are you these days on that spectrum?

I'm sure my friend Chuck would have at least a dozen new jokes or stories to tell about this subject since I last saw him, but his comment to me on my first night at the Waffle House still seems to apply, although perhaps with a little divine twist. Chuck said, "I don't care what anyone else says about you, I think you do good work." He's right, of course, that it can't matter what anyone else says about us. If that is our motivation, we'll always disappoint somebody, either them or ourselves. But what does matter, I think, is what God thinks about what we do or

don't do with our time, our resources, our compassion. Just as in Paul's time, there is too much at stake in the world for us to deny it what we can offer it. And in our own time, there is too much at stake in the world to think that we, rather than Jesus Christ, can save it, if we only work hard enough. If we can strike that happy medium, we'll be doing good work, and we won't grow weary, and we'll all be able to head on down to the Waffle House, I mean the Kingdom of heaven, and enjoy together a great meal with our hash browns scattered, smothered, covered, and chunked, and in whatever way we can imagine. Now, that's what Paul had in mind when he said, "Get to work." Amen.