

Living Spiritually

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have all heard one variation or another on the phrase: Idle hands are the devil's workshop, or sometimes: Idle hands are the devil's playground. Well, that line is a paraphrase in the Living Bible of Proverbs 16:27, although that actual line is more about how scoundrels use their time to concoct evil plans; but the idea is that idleness—laziness—sitting around doing nothing might create an opening for temptation. Well, of all the topics that you might guess would come up in the New Testament, idleness would hardly seem a likely candidate; but Paul talks about it somewhat often, including in 2 Thessalonians 3, a passage that we will dig into today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are coming to the end now of a very short, three-part series on a relatively short letter, 2 Thessalonians, Paul's second letter to the church at Thessalonica in the Greek city there. We have been doing one chapter per program. So, we did Chapter 1, where we noted Paul's great encouragement about the progress the Thessalonians have made in their Christ-likeness, but as well as the fact that they were undergoing persecution, and that they needed to remember that this, too, would end, and that Jesus would win the victory. Then we looked at the second chapter in the last program, where Paul addresses a concern that he heard that some of the Thessalonians had been seduced by those who were saying: Hey, Jesus already came back in secret, and you missed it. And Paul says: No; and he lays out a whole bunch of things that have to happen first about this man of lawlessness; but now we are coming to the end of it in Chapter 3.

DAVE BAST

We are, and it seems rather a surprising turn when we come to Chapter 3 because after just focusing on all this almost speculative stuff, and scary stuff about the end times. You know, they had so many questions and so many misapprehensions and misassumptions about the end of the world and Christ's return, and all of a sudden here in Chapter 3 Paul drops right smack into the middle of everyday life and ordinary daily problems about getting up and going to work. It might seem odd to us, but that actually is the way we are called to live. We are not called to get hyped up all the time about the end of the world. We are called to just kind of go about our daily business and live for God and live for his kingdom; and so, that is how Paul writes in Chapter 3.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, he writes: ¹Finally, 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. ²And that we may be rescued from wicked and evil people, for not all have faith. ³But the Lord is faithful. He will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. ⁴And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing, and will go on doing the things that we command. ⁵May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. So, this is interesting, Dave. There are a number of things we could talk about, but we could zero in, maybe, on one thing initially here. Paul...of all the people who wrote the New Testament, Paul is the apostle who is

crystal clear on salvation by grace alone. Paul is the apostle of all grace. He always makes it clear, it is all grace; and yet, very often, Paul in his letters has a lot of commands and imperatives, and orders; and here, too, he has said: By the way, you know you have to do everything we command you, right? And so, you could wonder, well, wait a minute. How does obedience and following commands square with being saved by grace?

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, it is another one of those both/ands that the New Testament is full of; but it is interesting to note that Paul begins this third chapter with a request for prayer, very personal, and he is in trouble, too. He is experiencing some of the same things they are, which is to say, opposition from the world—opposition from unbelievers, for whatever reason, and it is kind of strange when you stop and think about it, why do people hate Christians so much, in so many places? Why are they so opposed? I mean, Christians back then, by and large, it was a tiny movement at that time. There were not that many of them. They were pretty innocuous. They were pretty peace-loving...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

They were pretty innocent. They tried to do good to others; and yet, this hatred was heaped on them, and they were vilified. I have been reading a book recently about the earliest Christians, and the things that they were accused of falsely were just astonishing; and you think, what aroused such hatred? But Paul says: I am experiencing this and I hope you will pray for me, and especially pray that God's Word would continue to go out...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And be glorified. I love that. It is not just him, it is the Gospel that he cares about.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not all people have faith, Paul writes here; and boy, that is true. Of course, we all know a lot of people who don't have Christian faith who are nice, decent people, too; but some who lack faith actively try to get after Christians. This goes back to evil; and so, Paul says pray for us and as we encounter these people we will pray for you as you encounter those people. Meanwhile, we know that you will not finally fall. Part of the reason for that is, again, you have to do what we have commanded you to do. So, we will loop back to that question: Okay, God is going to protect you, but you have to behave. You have to obey; and again, if we are saved 155% by grace alone, where does all this talk of obedience come in?

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, there are always two ways to go astray. You can fall off to the left or to the right if you are on the balance beam of Christian truth. One way to fall off on the over emphasis of grace thing is to say: Well then, it doesn't matter what I do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

There is a famous remark attributed to a skeptic who said: I like to sin, God likes to forgive; everything is admirably arranged. Let's just keep sinning and that will give him more of what he loves to do, which is to forgive sins. Paul says: No way, no how...huh uh. It doesn't work that way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But it doesn't work the other way either, where people sometimes conclude: Well, by grace Jesus got the salvation ball rolling, but he didn't seal the deal. So, we have to obey and we have to behave because God is going to grade on the curve, so we have got to finish Jesus' work. He didn't finish it. Well, both extremes underestimate and misunderstand grace. To say eat, drink and be merry because God will forgive us tomorrow anyway...that ignores the transforming power of grace. To say, on the other hand, well, if we don't behave, we won't go to heaven, that underestimates the power of God's grace that Jesus really did do it all. So, we ask: Is it grace or obedience? And we say, well, it is both because grace...if you understand it correctly...grace activates obedience.

DAVE BAST

Right; and so, Paul says we are confident of this, that you are going to keep doing what we have commanded you to do. Those commands basically all are riffs on the basic command to love—love God, love one another—love is the fulfillment of the law, Paul says, in one place. So, you are going to keep on striving for that kind of loving behavior, but we are also confident that God is going to kind of point you toward his love and the steadfastness of Christ. You are going to hang in there—you are going to persevere—because again, God's grace is at work in you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And very often...he doesn't do it explicitly here...but very often in Paul's letters he will kind of remind people of the fact that they are baptized believers—that they became new people in baptism; and so now, when you become a new person, you are supposed to act like a new person, and that is sort of also where grace and obedience go together. Grace changed you, or it was supposed to. If it really took hold, it changed you...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is going to show up in how you live, and that is going to be part of your witness to the world. We saw that earlier in this letter, where Paul basically says: You are supposed to be a walking advertisement for the kingdom. People should look at you and say: Hey, I want what she's got.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I want to be like that. Tell me more about what makes you that way, and now we can tell about Jesus. So, that is how it is supposed to work.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, this is great; it is warm; it is encouraging. Paul has confidence for them, but you know, he wouldn't be Paul if he didn't have some warnings as well, and we will turn to that next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So, let's get right back into 2 Thessalonians Chapter 3. Paul writes: ⁶Now 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. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us. We were not idle when we were with you, ⁸and 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. ⁹This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁰For even when we were with you we gave you this command. Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. ¹¹For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. ¹²Now, such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ, do their work quietly and to earn their own living. ¹³Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. So, this is a curious and interesting little passage, Dave.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it really is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

As we said before, you would expect Paul...like he did in the first letter...to be concerned about things like sexual morality and staying away from the immorality of the culture; not getting drunk or not cursing and swearing; but here the problem he focuses on seems a little second or third tier: laziness, idleness, not wanting to contribute to the community, kind of being a sponge on other people. That doesn't seem like the most important thing in the world, but Paul makes a big deal of it here, and this is not the only place in the New Testament where he is concerned about this either.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it is a little difficult to know exactly what was going on here. I mean, why this idleness? But Paul certainly pays quite a bit of attention to it. He seems to think this is a serious moral problem—the fact that some people weren't working...weren't willing to work, as he was willing to work. One of the beautiful things about Paul...you know, we often talk about a tentmaker...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Or a tent-making ministry, and that goes right back to the example of Paul, because we know from the book of Acts that that was Paul's trade. We think of him as this great rabbi, but even as a classically trained rabbi, Paul still had to earn a living somehow. I mean, it wasn't like there was an endowed chair in a university that he could occupy and sort of live off the royalties of his writings. So, when he went about these different cities, he would find a job. He would occupy himself as a...he was a leather worker. They would make tents out of leather; maybe he made handbags, I don't know; but Paul says to them: Look, you know what I did. I didn't even try to live off you, though I would have had the right. He also affirms clearly that Gospel ministers have the right to be supported by their parishioners—by their congregations; but Paul says: I didn't want to do that because I wanted to set you an example.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, it is very interesting...it is very curious. Now, we said in the previous program that there had been some speculation that Jesus had already returned. It could be that some people were saying: Well, if the gig is up...if Jesus is back...I guess we don't have to do anything; we can just sit around.

DAVE BAST

Or if he is almost back, you know...why go to work?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; if he is coming tomorrow, why...yes, right. That could be part of it. The word for idleness here...in the Greek it is a word that doesn't come up a whole lot. It is *ataktos* in the Greek, for those of you who would like to know that; and the meaning of *ataktos* is something that is just out of place—something that is disordered—something that is just out of whack—that is the general meaning of that word Paul uses, but it is usually colloquially translated as laziness or idleness, which would mean that in Paul's view, if you are a Christian believer, to just be a busybody...to just sit around all day and not do anything but spread gossip, or just, you know, sip on some iced tea all day or something, that that is somehow disordered...that that doesn't fit...that is out of whack somehow, because Christian people should be joyful people, but also should be joyfully busy people who are thankful for the gifts God has given them, and rejoice in being able to use those gifts to earn a living, to earn your place in the community, but to contribute something to society—to the church—to the kingdom.

DAVE BAST

I think we should point out something that ought to be obvious. Paul says if you *won't* work, you shouldn't eat.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

He doesn't say if you *cannot* work, you shouldn't eat...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

So clearly he is exempting people who, because of age or infirmity or some other problem, are simply unable to perform any longer, that should be a given that we all recognize; but, what he is addressing is this problem of able-bodied people who should know better and who ought to be able to do something constructive and positive, to simply sit back and do nothing; and Paul says: That ain't right...you know...it reminds me of something I read once somewhere along the way in history that this verse was quoted in the Jamestown colony, the first English settlement in North America...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, really?

DAVE BAST

Founded in 1609; and there were apparently some people there who just wanted to sit around and live off the labor of others, and the leader of that colony, Captain John Smith, said: Look, here it says in the Bible: Let him who will not work not eat, and that is going to happen to you if you don't shape up.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but we said earlier, too, Dave, that after all of the talk of the end times and concern about the return of Christ and so forth and so on, that this chapter brings us right back into everyday, earthy, mundane concerns; and indeed, what does that tell us? Well, it tells us that sometimes we think that the spiritual is opposed to the physical, or the spiritual or being a spiritual person means you float ten feet off the ground. Not true, Paul says. If you are going to be a Christian, you are going to be a Christian, not just in church, and not just when you close your eyes and pray, you are going to be a Christian on the playground and you are going to be a Christian in the boardroom, and you are going to be a Christian at the grocery store, and you are going to be a Christian in the auto repair shop. That is the context in which we live out our Christian calling. How we behave, how we work, what we say. It is not all pie in the sky; it is not all looking at the horizon waiting for Jesus to come back; it is very hands on. Everything Paul is talking about here is hands on, everyday, gritty

reality. That is where you are called to be Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and it also ties into their identity as, now, citizens of the kingdom of God. Paul mentioned living for the kingdom earlier in 2 Thessalonians, and growing in their faith and in their life as Christians—as followers of Jesus; and whatever work we may be able to do...however humble...however routine...in some way or another, it is contributing to the welfare of others, which is to say it is contributing to the kingdom; and it is bearing witness to the shalom that God wants to bring about and in the process of bringing about, and will finally complete at the return of Christ. So, again, the antithesis of faith is idleness, in a sense, it is doing nothing. It is thinking you've got it made. It's thinking, you know, it doesn't involve you in any way. You can just sort of live for yourself. No; rather than that, Paul says, give yourself and keep growing into the love of God, and follow the steadfast example of Jesus; because Jesus himself, as he said, came to do his Father's will...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

He says I am working and the Father is working. He says that in John 5. This is why I am doing what I am doing, because I came to do the work of God; and so should we.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, Paul has already hinted here that not everybody in Thessalonica was doing that. Some are not doing very well with that. Paul has a little bit more to say about that, and as we close the program, we will take that up next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are wrapping up now a short series—three parts—on the three chapters of the little letter of 2 Thessalonians; and we have just been talking about how Paul, in this last chapter, brings it all down to earth...all this talk about the end of the world and running around and panicky. No, Paul says: Look, just focus on going to work. Don't sit around...don't be idle...don't be a busybody...don't go gadding about gossiping and prying into other people's business, and passing on things that you have heard; and if you don't want to do that, then you shouldn't eat, either, which is kind of a strong medicine.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we have noted in the first program of this series that Paul has lavish words of praise for the Thessalonians and their progress in faith and love, but not everybody, as is always the case. No matter how good a church is, there are always some problems, and some problem people. Here in verse 14 of 2 Thessalonians 3, Paul has something of strong words:

Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter. Have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed, ¹⁵but do not regard them as enemies; warn them as believers.

DAVE BAST

The first thing he says is don't have anything to do with them...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Which has led some church bodies to the practice of shunning...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And so, they single out people who have had a misstep or a failure of some kind; or people who don't toe the line, and they absolutely exclude them from their lives. Parents won't speak to children. It can be terrible; and that surely is a misapplication of this text, and of other texts in the New Testament, because Paul immediately goes on to say: Don't regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right...

DAVE BAST

So, how can you do both?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, we have to do both. So, Paul is saying in one sense, don't hang out with them so much without ever saying anything, that you end up being corrupted by them, right? Bad company corrupts good morals, they say; or one bad apple ruins the whole batch. We have heard these warnings from our parents and others before. So, Paul is saying don't hang out with them too much because you are going to end up doing what they do. You are going to get sucked into their sinfulness, their idleness, their laziness; but that doesn't mean you never talk to them. In fact, you have to warn them as believers. So, interesting. Paul doesn't say they are unbelievers. He says they are believers, but they need to feel a little shame about how they are living; and so, somehow or another, we have to kind of walk this tightrope. On the one hand, we don't want to hang out with them and never say anything about their lifestyle; and in fact, therefore be tempted to adopt it ourselves; but on the other hand, we have to find a way to warn them, and to try to motivate them to kind of get moving here and get with the program, which introduces an interesting theme, Dave, which comes up all through Paul's writings. My friend Neal Plantinga has often noted this; that if you look at the New Testament and look at Paul's letters, but also the letters of James and John and Peter and the others, there was an assumption in the early Church that one thing that was going to happen a lot was rebuking—that we were going to get in each other's faces on a regular basis to say: Stop! Stop doing that; start doing this. But today, and I suspect this was true all through history, and it was probably true in Thessalonica two thousand years ago...we don't like doing that really...

DAVE BAST

No.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We would rather live and let live. Yes, we see what Phyllis is doing with her gossip, but I am not going to go tell Phyllis to knock it off...you do it. I would rather just, you know, keep my distance. Paul says you are not supposed to do that in the church.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; we are supposed to warn them, he says, and that involves, as you say, rebuking; and we...most of us are conflict averse. I know I am. I don't want to get in anybody's face; I don't want to come across as holier than thou. I don't want to try to correct someone, because people generally don't take correction very well...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, they might leave the church.

DAVE BAST

And they will lash out at you; but Paul says no. He assumes this is just going to happen and it is something you need to do. Don't regard them as enemies. I love that line, too...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

People are not the enemy. There is an enemy, and he sometimes is working through people, and we talk about the great problems that we face of the world, the flesh and the devil. It is all in us and we are caught up in that stuff, but people are not the enemy, people are to be loved. Somehow, we need to have the courage...you know, you are involved, you are with someone and you hear them say something terribly racist, and you just kind of bite your lip and say oh, well, you know... No; we need to lovingly confront as we are able.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, there is no one-size-fits-all way to do this. There are ways to rebuke which make things worse. There are ways of rebuking that make *you* end up being guilty of some bad behavior. Be wise, Paul would say...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Every situation is different. How you confront one person is going to be different from how you confront another person. So, be wise; but, above all, certainly keep in mind that this is an important part of life together in community.

DAVE BAST

You know, Scott, it strikes me...just now I was thinking...one place where this actually happens...not so much the church...but, in sports teams. They *do* hold one another accountable. Teammates will get in another teammate's face when they do something bad or when they are lazy, or when it is through lack of effort...not an honest mistake, but lack of effort; and they will call one another to accountability; and they will do it in a tough way. Coaches will do that...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that's right.

DAVE BAST

And so, Paul says: Look, that is the kind of thing I am talking about. We need to challenge one another. I just read a comment where an athlete said to a teammate: You're better than that. That is the kind of attitude and approach we can take with one another as believers.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Let's close this program and this series just hearing Paul's final word from 2 Thessalonians 3:16-18: ¹⁶Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in all ways. The Lord be with all of you. ¹⁷I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark of every letter of mine; this is the way I write. ¹⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

So, there is Paul's signature. He was not able to write most of his letters. He dictated them, but here was his signature to say: I love you—I love you.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and this is really me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, this is really me; and so, that is the final word; even through all of our faults, may God give you peace. Amen.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com, to share what *Groundwork* means to you; or tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

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