

## What is our work?

What is our work? As believers, how are we to understand and participate in work? In Genesis, God's creation of all there is is described as work. So work can be divine, creative, and part of God's mission. Adam is given work to do in the Garden. And it was good. So work can be God-given and even sacred. Then, after humans broke the only rule they'd been given, their work is complicated by thorns and thistles. Work can be a hardship.

And to that we add in 2 Thessalonians work that is part of being a Christian community. Writing to a community of believers, the letter says, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work." It sounds like the work is a requirement of participating in that community.

Moreover, here in the letter to the Thessalonians, we are told there is a connection between work and being allowed to eat. And I have to say reading that passage made me a little bit upset. A little angry even. After all, throughout the ministry of Jesus, he teaches by word and example that we are to feed anyone who is hungry. Without question. There is no requirement that people do anything in order to come to Jesus' table, only that they be hungry.

What are we to make of this apparent contradiction?

Let me be clear about what this passage in 2 Thessalonians doesn't mean.

- This passage is not about public policy. It is addressed specifically to believers in a Christian community. And that is important because this passage has, in fact been used to justify work requirements for food assistance. And that is, in my opinion, a wrong use of this Scripture.
- The authors of this letter are not saying we should shun those who don't work, all believers are worthy of inclusion in the community, even when they incur consequences for bad behavior.
- They are not addressing those who are unable to work or, as in our time, cut off from work opportunities.
- And the letter is not addressing what we might call in our time a Protestant Work Ethic, which (very broadly speaking) values individual work as a sign of one's election to salvation and equates idleness with sinfulness. In the time of this letter, that was not the understanding of work at all.

So, what do they mean when they are talking about work? And the letter talks about "idleness," what is going on? Here are some possibilities.

The believers in Thessalonica lived in circumstances very different from ours. For one thing, they were trying to maintain and grow a new Christian community and at the same time faced persecution. Their work included both the regular efforts to put food on their tables and their missionary work to keep bread on the Lord's table. In both

cases, they were working together, sharing what they had, supporting one another. They relied on cooperation with one another.

It seems that there were some in the community who believed that the coming of Christ was so imminent that they need not continue working. We know this from the letter itself, which offers solace for the persecution the Thessalonians are facing and warns them not to be sidetracked by false teaching “to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.”

This brings us to “idleness” which is a complicated word in this letter. I am quite certain there were in this community, as in ours and all communities of human beings, people who were idle. People who didn’t always pull their weight, as it were. And in the context of this community, to be idle - to refrain from work - would affect the whole community in a negative way.

However, there is another possible meaning. The word translated as “idle” here from the Greek can also mean “disorderly” or “irresponsible.” So rather than talking about people who are lazy, the letter may be pointing to people who are interfering with the work of others, disrupting their community work. This would go along with the letter’s mention of the idlers being busybodies. They are meddling. That’s very different from being inactive.

With this new understanding, what can we now see the letter is saying to us?

I believe it is not about a work requirement for food, but rather a requirement that people in Christian community be engaged in shared work for the mission of the Church. When it comes to being the church, we are to work cooperatively for a common mission - God’s mission - and not for our own needs and desires.

There are and always will be people in human communities who only work for their own wellbeing and acclaim, not for the community. Even when that work is as holy as working for the Kingdom of God. But the work Jesus has given us to build one another up and share the Good News is a team sport, you might say. It requires all of us working together. And not only because it takes all of us to get the work done, but also because togetherness, community, is the point.

Our work is to be in communion with one another and with God.  
In communion.

In a way, if you undermine this work or drop out of it altogether, you are starving yourself.

So, what is our work? If we go all the way back to Genesis, we can see a connection to the work of God in creation, the work given to humanity, and the work of the Thessalonians. The first work is God’s work in creation and Adam’s invitation to

participate in that work. That work is good and part of what it means to be in communion with God. We participate in God's activity in the world.

Even when work becomes toil, when hardships rise up between us and our work, we are still to labor for the cause of supporting our life together. This is as true for the Thessalonians as it was for Adam. The thorns and thistles they face are persecution, yet they labor on with their community for the mission of the Gospel.

Today, here at St. Mark's in Austin, in 2022, we also have work to do. Not just the work in our offices or schools. Our common work is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, to let all who listen know they are loved and worthy of love. This work bring us into communion with each other and with God. It looks like caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, visiting the lonely. Like teaching each other and supporting each other. This work feels like taking what we learn here with each other out into the world.

In our work, we encounter thorns and thistles - sometimes in the form of hatred and violence. Sometimes in the form of selfishness and greed. Sometimes, honestly, in the form of idleness and disorderliness amongst ourselves.

The word to the believers in Thessalonica is a word to us, as well, "Bothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right." Our work is to be in communion with each other and with God. And to invite others into communion, too.  
Amen.