

Ok, so we're going to look at scripture together.

[Reading 2 Thessalonians 3:1-15]

Amen, I just note as I read that passage that there's quite a lot of commanding going on. Paul is not, sort of, backwards in giving commands from the Lord, and we're in a very different culture today - I think if I was to command you to do something I might get a bit of push back because we're not in that, we don't like to have anyone telling us what we should do, and not making it a plea or an invitation, but rather saying you must do this. We're not in that culture any more and so we would struggle with being told to do things in such a forthright way. But, we have to remember the context in which Paul was writing these words to the church in Thessalonica, where they were surrounded by a culture that was very very different to the Christian culture that Paul was inviting them to develop in their own lives, and within the small church fellowship that they found themselves in.

Remember they were surrounded by a very strong Greek/Roman culture, where Idols were worshipped on most street corners. In Thessalonica at the corner of most of the roads, most of the streets, there probably would have been a little shrine, and there'd be a Greek god in that shrine. And everyone who was a good Roman Citizen would just take a little bit of the incense and drop it into the fire in front of that god, and it was a way of saying "I'm part of the of the Empire, I submit to the Roman gods..." (which were the Greek gods by another name) "...I submit to them and therefore I submit to Caesar." And Paul was saying: "You have a different God, you worship not at the little shrines, or go to the temples, to Apollo, or whoever else in the city, you follow a Lord who you cannot see and yet who we believe to be the Lord of all."

That just occurred to me as we were reading that scripture.

So we're going to look at a Biblical view of three things this morning as we look at this teaching.

Firstly we're going to look at a Biblical view of work. What does Paul tell us, through this passage, about what work should be. If we were to go back to Genesis 2:15 we find there some interesting words about work. Work was intended, initially, to be something that was a blessing; work was intended to be something where you could see, literally, the fruit, or the vegetables, of your labour.

So I want to just read to you that verse, Genesis 2:15: "The Lord took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to take care of it."

That sense the work was first developed as something which was in relationship with God - God offered work as something that was to be a blessing in the lives of human beings. But sadly, work has for so many moved on from that [describes picture: it's a Roman soldier with arrows sticking out of his shield, looking rather dishevelled and saying "I don't know, I'm getting sick of this work lark", or something like that" - he's basically saying "I'm sick of work, it's so hard, I'm constantly under attack"]. So the Biblical view of work has been changed so much. Now hopefully those of you who do work, it's not quite as bad as feeling as though you are constantly having arrows fired you, but work has changed, hasn't it?

Work is something that we no longer so often feel that that sense of the connection to positive

growth and giving something back in a way that we can tangibly see it. Stephanie spoke a little bit earlier when she gave her little word about asking to be prayed for: she spoke about the pressures of having to work, for wanting to study, and to need to look after her daughter as well, and the pressures of work can be something that really becomes something on us that's hard to balance everything, and we can feel overburdened by work and by the expectation that are placed on us. But work was not intended to be that.

It's interesting, the whole business of, you know, growing stuff these days that often people take that up not as work, they taking it up as a, you know, whether you have an allotment or, we've got a vegetable garden in our back garden (not that I tend it, but I have a son and a wife that love to grow things, and thankfully I love to eat things grown in the garden – it works very very well, from my perspective). But often, actually, that group growing things: it's an escape from work because we love to be able to see the things that we have had a hand in bringing about and growing in that way.

So as we look at this idea of work, I want to look once again at the Roman Empire and the way that work was understood in the Roman Empire – of course it was the Roman Empire that Paul is writing to in this letter, but also in all of his other letters. What was their understanding of work within the Roman Empire? Well, you had various (and I'm not going to give all of the various) strata of their society – I'm just going to pick out the four main ones that I wanted to refer to.

So at the very top, just below the emperor (because he was regarded as a god within later Roman culture) came the Patricians. And of course that word is a reference to being a father, so it was the founding fathers. Now we need to remember that Paul with a Jewish man, but he was also a Roman Citizen himself – he had this really position of status within the Roman Empire: he was a Citizen. But he wrote these two letters, first and second Thessalonians, and his other letters, but in particular these two letters he wrote to this city with a strong Greek-Roman culture. And it had a strict hierarchy within its society: at the very top were these Patricians – they were the elite, they were mainly the families of Rome's founding fathers, they were the ruling class, they were the Senators, they were the judges, and the other people of that very very high ruling class within the Roman Empire. They could vote on laws; they also had the power to veto laws, they didn't like. Immense power within the society – that was the Patricians.

The under that you had the Plebians (and we get our word the Plebs from that), and it just means the Ordinary People, the lower class – the Ordinary People. They were often shop owners, and they could still hold less important Public Offices, and they could vote, but, of course, they had no veto. But they could vote. So they had some “skin in the game” as we could call it.

Below that we have the Freedmen. Freedmen were usually craftsmen and traders. They had very few rights, and they had no votes.

And then right at the bottom of the social order was the Slaves. Now Slaves were not even regarded as people – they were possessions. They had no rights. The jobs they did were the jobs that no one else wanted to do: to be miners which was an incredibly dangerous profession because remember, they had none of the special means of supporting tunnels that we had today so miners would often find themselves caught in the fall of a tunnel, and would die in those circumstances, usually; they were farmhands; they were road builders; they were servants; they were prostitutes. They did all these jobs that no one else wanted to do, and we're not even really regarded as human beings.

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So, these people, the different social strata within Roman Society, they had very different attitudes towards work; the attitude of the privileged was: well, they avoided work because it was a symbol of their status – they were so rich they didn't have to work – and so they would not even walk in the streets, they will be carried in a sedan chair. And by the look of some of them they really needed quite a strong support system at the bottom of the sedan chair because if you don't do any walking, you're not going to be using much energy, and so the danger is you would get quite large. That was the privileged: they avoided work. The lower classes, of course, they couldn't afford to avoid work: work for them was about survival.

We could compare those in our western society today, sometimes referred to as the Precariat: those that are in low waged jobs (sometimes called “The gig economy” these days), where they are having to, sort of, work in really insecure jobs and finding themselves in a position of being very much at the whim of the employers who get the chance to choose how and when they will employ them. And it's sadly not as different to the situation that we had in the Roman empire 2000 years ago.

Interestingly the Greek and the Romans worshipped gods of leisure. If you know a little bit about your Greek and Roman gods, they didn't work; they interfered in human affairs because they had nothing else to do, and so they interfered in that way. Whereas the Jewish, and therefore the Christian, God, he worked to sustain all that he had created.

So, Greeks and Romans aspired to a life of leisure, but Jews, and therefore Christians, saw work as giving life purpose and meaning. So I think it's true: you can say, “You become like that which you worship.” If you desire to be at leisure, because you worship gods of leisure, you know you're aspiring to that rather than aspiring to be industrious, using your life for God's glory.

So we're going to take, having had a biblical look at work, we're going to, for a few moments. Just look at a biblical view of learning. Because having reflected on the work situation, or work and it being so important for Christians to work, as Paul says in these in the verses. He talks about how we learn: we learn by what we see. We learn by what we see, we learn by example. And in verses 8 and 9 of our Reading, Paul says “We worked day and night, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did it not because we do not have the right to such help but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate.”

Many of the Rabbis of those days, they would not work: they would simply be studying the scripture and then preaching, and would expect to be supported by their disciples. And yet Paul, who we know was a tentmaker (which was a particular profession back then), that he would work in order not to be a burden upon those that he was going to be preaching to. So we learn by what we see, what is modelled before us.

So Paul has strong words in his verses about those who could work, whether it is paid or unpaid, but they didn't choose to; and Paul is very strong in what he says to those who can work but won't.

These words, we can balance them against some equally strong teaching, for instance in James chapter 1 here some equally strong teaching, urging care for those who have no breadwinner in the home, or those who are unable to work for various reasons. James, the brother of Jesus, says “The religion that our God and father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress.” To be an orphan or a widow back then could be a horrible situation,

where they were often left in destitution unless somebody responded and helped them.

So this biblical view of learning: we learn by what we see, what is modelled before us.

But we also learn by what we hear. And Paul refers to this as well. We learn by what we hear.

In verse 10 he says "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: the one who is unwilling to work shall not eat." Hard words. But we have to take it in the context of what's already been said about widows and orphans, recognising the capacity for work is different for each of us in our situations.

So, that's a biblical view of work. Finally a biblical view work and of learning, and now a biblical view of discipline which takes us back to the beginning about Paul's commands to the people in Thessalonica. And he refers to two particular: he uses the phrase "The idle and disruptive" twice in this passage - he talks about those who are idle and disruptive.

Crispin earlier on referred to that English proverb which says "the devil finds work for idle hands". And many people do think actually it is from Scripture; well there are verses in Scripture that are quite similar to that, but "the devil finds work for idle hands". And it's this connection between been idle, not having much to do, and then being involved, getting involved in other people's lives. You're not busy says Paul, so you become a "busybody". He's making the connection between those who have to have too little of their own business, but they then interfere in the business of other people.

And Paul appeals to them in two ways.

He says - firstly appeals to the conscience, to their conscience - he says "Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ, to settle down and earn the food they eat. And ask for you brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good." So he's recognising there, he's saying: listen to your conscience, settle down, earn the food that you eat, do what is good.

This appeal relies on their conscience because the listeners would have known full well whether they were following Paul's teaching or not. They would have been sat there and, perhaps, those who had been interfering in what their neighbour or their friend had been doing, perhaps they would flush up a bit and realise "Yeah, that's me. I was interfering in such-and-such's life rather than getting on and making sure I am doing what I should be doing my life." And there would no doubt'd been consciences pricked, and Paul was wanting to do that in this passage.

But the second appeal that he makes is to the community. The community.

And he says "If anyone will not obey our message about working and doing whatever you can to contribute, then do not associate with them in order that they may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard them as an enemy but warn them as a fellow believer." Paul is saying: don't let those who constantly take from the community but give nothing back, don't allow them to get away with that because that undermines and devalues Christian community." For none of us it should it all be about taking and never giving back - that is not Christian community; in Christian community every one of us has something to offer as well as something to receive.

This is tough teaching. It's tough language that Paul uses here. It's the language of family. It's language in which he is saying: you are all connected, give to each other so that you can also receive from each other. It is loving, but it's still disciplined; because in any family there has to be discipline, otherwise is the love really real? Unless there is discipline, how can there be true love?

So, we are reminded here, in Paul's teaching, that discipline is a part of Christian living. We do it differently to the way that Paul probably would have done it. There aren't many commands that come from me (which is probably just as well). But we do live under the Lordship of Christ, and so we hear his commands to us as we read scripture, and as we listen to our conscience as the Lord leads us.

Let's Pray for a moment.

Dear Lord Jesus, we come to you as we complete this series looking at this second letter of Thessalonians. We pray Lord God that you have spoken to us through this, this study, this month looking at this book. In particular Lord this morning, as we have thought of work, as we thought of how we can be employed, not in the formal sense, all of us, but employed in that sense of finding useful ways to contribute in our church, in our community. And that Lord God you will help us to find those ways that we can use our gifts and abilities for your glory. It may simply be a word of encouragement; it may be getting alongside a neighbour and helping them in a difficult time; it may be supporting someone who is struggling in their work situation, someone, perhaps, that we work with or we know and we're able to just be a long time, praying for them, listening, and being available to them. Lord Jesus, we pray that you will continue to knit us together as your people, recognising that we all work in that sense of contributing to the body, that everyone may know they have value within your Kingdom.

In your name we pray these things Lord Jesus, Amen.