

2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-13  
WORKING HARD

Have you ever heard of “tentmaking” as a Church ministry and mission strategy? It is now not about making tents, but about Christians serving God through the work they do. *“Christians in many skills, trades, businesses and professions, can often go to places where traditional church planters and evangelists may not. What these ‘tentmakers’ and business people do in the workplace must be valued as an aspect of the ministry of local churches.” (Lausanne Cape Town commitment)* There are places in the world that are closed to Christian missionaries in a traditional sense, but they are open to people in business, or teachers, or doctors to go to work in these countries; Christians can’t preach or do evangelism, but they can be Christians in these places and by being there can bring something of Jesus to the people they meet. The work they do supports them being there! “Tentmakers!”

The whole “tentmakers” idea comes from Paul when he first visited Corinth. When he arrived there, he met Priscilla and Aquila, a couple who would become good friends. He went to see them and the three of them began to work together, not as Christian missionaries at first, but as tentmakers. In Corinth, they made tents together and supported themselves by their work; they had food to eat because they worked making tents and selling them in the market place afterwards. Then on the Sabbath, Paul went to the synagogue and told people about Jesus and tried to persuade them to become Christians; this ministry was supported by his work and his income as a tentmaker. This stopped when Silas and Timothy arrived in Corinth and we presume that they brought some money with them, maybe a gift from Christians in some other place, probably Philippi and because of that gift Paul was able to give himself full-time to ministry.

The practice of most Christian churches across the world now is to support paid, full-time leaders. People like me are paid to be your minister so that I am free to give myself to the work of ministry without the distraction of having to do another job at the same time. About half of the money you give to Juniper Green Church each year, goes to support my ministry and the ministry of people like me in parts of the country where congregations are small and can’t support themselves; the church believes that ministry should be full-time and paid. You may have heard of OLM, Ordained local Ministry: Fiona Kennedy who did a placement here last year is training to be an OLM and when she is ordained, she will not be paid; she will work part-time while doing another job at the same time, a way of giving people an opportunity to exercise ministry in a different way and a way of the church being able to expand the range of ministry.

“Work hard!” That is the big idea in 2 Thessalonians 3. We don’t know what Paul did when he arrived in Thessalonica; did he work as a tentmaker there too? All we’re told is that he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath and told people about Jesus; what did he do for the rest of the week? He worked hard. *“You yourselves...” (2 Thessalonians 3:7ff)* He worked hard; he was not a burden to them; he didn’t scrounge food from anyone but paid for it; he didn’t rely on hospitality, but looked after himself; he prides himself on the fact that he was not a burden to the Christians in Thessalonica for as long as he was there. He did his ministry on the Sabbath and for the rest of time he went to work, he plied his trade; he made money to support himself and the ministry of the gospel and the gospel spread till his enemies created a riot and chased him out of town!

*“You yourselves...” (2 Thessalonians 3:7)* “Work hard!” In this respect, they are to follow Paul’s example. Not all of Christians in Thessalonica were apostles; not all Christians in Thessalonica had the ability to go into the synagogue and tell people about Jesus, but perhaps most of them had the capacity to work hard. I’ve met people in church life who make all sorts of promises about what they will do and what they will contribute to church life, but when push comes to shove, they do nothing. I’ve met far more people who have made no such promises, but who

give hours and hours of their time to the life of the Church and the work of the gospel. They have a commitment and they get on and do it; they work hard for Jesus and for the church; they give of their time, energy and money for the life of the Church and for the gospel and the church is built, and the kingdom is extended by their hard work. Maybe nobody knows what they do; maybe nobody sees what they do; maybe they prefer it that way; they work hard, and Jesus is glorified by their hard work.

Not everyone in Thessalonica was working hard. *“keep away...”* (2 *Thessalonians* 3:6) Is that a bit harsh? There was a reason and it is all about Jesus’ promise to come again; last week we talked about some saying Jesus’ second coming had already happened, or some saying that it was never going to happen. Today, people had given up their jobs and given up working hard because “Jesus is coming soon so what’s the point in working hard!” They gave up work because they thought Jesus’ coming was imminent; there is no point in working hard if the world is about to end! Do you remember in the run up to year 2000, people especially in the USA went away to hide in caves, and they stocked up with food and such like because the millennium was coming and the world might come to an end! This is the same kind of way of thinking: this approaching event led them to give up working hard!

*“If a...”* (2 *Thessalonians* 3:10) Is this even more harsh? The detail matters here. Here is a man who refuses to work; he is perfectly able to work, but he refuses to work because Jesus is coming soon and he just will not do it. He is capable of earning a living and earning money to buy bread, but he refuses to work and perhaps is now scrounging from others. This man, says Paul, should not be allowed to scrounge from his neighbours and fellow-Christians! Elsewhere, Paul writes with great compassion about the Church supporting those who are in genuine need, who are poor and need help, and the church should share with people in need. This is different. People are not to be idle, and refuse to work, but are to work hard; Paul is the example to follow. Those who refuse to play their part diminish the church.

There is another sense in which the Church is diminished. *“We hear...”* (2 *Thessalonians* 3:11f) Paul’s neat play on words has been kept by the NIV, *“not busy, but busybodies”*. A busybody is someone who meddles, who interferes in someone else’s affairs, who pokes their nose in where it is not wanted and not needed. We look up to people who are busy; we don’t look up to people who are busybodies. Busybodies diminish the church: they spoil relationships within the church and they give the church a bad reputation outside. They are people who love to have the latest gossip and never think twice about passing it on whether it is true or not; they are people who want to know what you’re doing or what is happening in your day, not because they are interested but because they want to tell people that “I know something you don’t know!” Relationships are spoiled, people are diminished and the reputation of the church and the gospel is undermined.

“Work hard”. There are lots of ways in which we work in the life of the church. People like me exercise one kind of service, but there are lots of kinds of service on which the life of the Church depends. “Work hard” applies to all of them; do the things that your service expects you to do! You might well say, and with good reason, “I’m passed working hard! I’m too frail and have no energy left; I’ve done my hard work!” That’s fine; we honour you for your hard work, but let me invite you to work hard in prayer for those of us who still have the energy; work hard to pray for the life of the church and for people who still have jobs to do; by that kind of hard work, the church is built up and we are all encouraged. The Church of Scotland has described this time between September and December as a season for prayer, asking us to pray for the Church, for our radical plan, for the new body of Trustees and the new Chief Officer and indeed for the whole mission of Church. Work hard to pray.

“Does this idea of working hard not diminish people who depend on benefits from the state?” No! This is about people who refuse to work, not about people who are unable to work; Paul

saw that people who were elderly, or sick, or in other ways incapacitated should be helped and supported by others, in his time by the church, in our time by the state.

Finally, there is one last way in which we are all to work hard: “As for...” (2 *Thessalonians* 3:13) “Do what is right!” That is a challenge for all of us! We live in a world where the idea of “right and wrong” is often thrown away; “I’ll do as I please!” We are to work hard to do what is right and Jesus sets the agenda. Jesus shows us and teaches us what is right. “Love God and love your neighbour” would sum it up. We need to understand what it means to love God and love our neighbour, but to love God and to love other people is probably the best short way of understanding what is right! Work hard at doing both of these! Never tire of doing both of these!

We work hard for Jesus because Jesus has worked hard for us. Let me take to you to Gethsemane, to the garden on the night before Jesus died, when He is in agony in His spirit; He knew that the next day meant the cross, but part of Him wondered if there was a way out. He prayed; He agonised over His choice; He worked hard to pray and ask God “what way?” Then He chose the way of the cross and worked hard to bring His mission to the right end. Nothing of this was easy for Jesus. He worked hard for us, to save us, to love us, to bring us hope. Our calling is to work hard for Jesus, to work hard at prayer, to work hard at doing what is right, to work hard at being servants, to work hard at building the Church and the kingdom. What will it be?