

TUAN TO
I Thes 5:14

The Dangers of Idling – Idleness as a Contemporary Challenge

II Thessalonians 3:6-13

13:30
10:30
35

John was a very likable person. He had lots of friends in High School and college. He was fun to be around and he had a positive view of life. He was also someone that had lots of plans. He was always sharing about the next idea he had to make money or fix up a house or minister for Jesus. When you initially met John you were often impressed – here was someone who was going places. Yet the longer you knew him, the more you noticed none of these things actually happened. His basement, garage and yard are now full of “stuff” that was supposed to be the next big way to make money. His house and property are decaying without any evidence of much effort being put into them. And at church, John often tells others what they should do, but rarely carries through with ministries or service himself. John is a Biblical idler – he is personally idling.

In our day, environmental groups promote “idling laws”. There are great dangers to our environment with a billion or two idling their cars & trucks too long and it consumes valuable, nonrenewable energy sources. But there is a more destructive idling according to the Bible. In fact, our short section of Scripture today uses the word “idle” 3 times! When something is repeated that often in a context, it is important. Now the word “idle” – *i d l e* sounds very similar to “idol” – *i d o l*, at least when I pronounce it – so today I will use the word *idleness* or *idler* rather than *idle* so there is less confusion.

The English definition of an idler is one who “avoids work, is lazy, without purpose, and doing nothing.” By this definition, most Americans would think that definitely doesn’t describe them! They see their life as incredibly hectic – busy all the time – never enough time for themselves. But the Biblical truth is that Americans are consumed with idleness. As we noted a few months ago, objective scientific studies show Americans actually have more free time than in the past but we are wasting it on a lot of non-work time in front of screens – computer screens, video game screens, TV screens, movie screens, cell phone screens and probably a few screens I left out. While we often think of an idler as that couch potato who lies on the sofa in their underwear watching sports endlessly with a beer, Biblically, an idler is someone who is **not diligent** in carrying out their earthly responsibilities. They lack self-discipline.

PROPOSITION: Living in a country with such abundance can lead Christians to idleness or unconsciously encouraging/supporting it in others – Jesus calls us to live counter-culturally!

I. We have clear earthly responsibilities

Let’s start our investigation into our Bible passage today, by looking at what the apostle Paul had written to the Thessalonians a year before.

A. Some church people were ‘idle’

I Thes 4:11-12, 5:14;
II Thes 3:6, 11

READ I Thes 5:14. Here, we are told to “warn” those who are practicing idleness. That means idleness is something that is harmful to the person, the family, the local church and God’s work. Look back to **I Thes 4:11-12. READ.** Far from urging Christians to be verbally silent about the gospel or their faith in Jesus as some have wrongly claimed, these words were meant to encourage Christians to avoid the sin of idleness and meddling in other people’s lives. **So what is this idling all about?** Now let’s turn to our passage today, starting with 2nd Thessalonians 3:6.

As I mentioned, the word “idle” is used 3 times in this short section – verse 6, verse 7, and verse 11. **READ v 6.** Notice the words have gotten stronger here compared to the last letter. There it “urged” & “warned” them to stop their idleness and get a job to support themselves, while here it definitively states this is a command of Jesus.

Apparently, the warning had not been heeded. **READ v 11-12.** Some of the Christians were deliberately not working and had come up with fine sounding spiritual reasons why this is what God had for them. We aren’t told what those reasons are, but they probably sounded like some of these people have given since that time ...

- They may have said that Jesus is coming again and will destroy all physical things by fire, so why do we waste our time taking care of earthly things – we need to spend all our time on spiritual things like prayer & Bible reading and depend on God to provide our physical needs.
- They may have said that the only work that counts is spiritual work. Jobs, chores, maintaining and cleaning our homes, those are all “lesser jobs” for people who are not so dedicated to Jesus.
- They may have seen themselves like the philosophers in their area who were supported by a rich patron. Their job was simply to tell other people how to live better. Their patron & others around them were responsible to get them food, housing and clothing. If you read history or commentaries this is called the patron-client relationship.
- They may have had a disdain for physical labor itself saying it was below them
- They may have said that it’s responsibility of the rich to take care of them.
- Or they may just have been lazy, undisciplined, fanciful dreamers or unfocused like John in the beginning of our sermon.

B. Idleness led to disruption, freeloading, meddling & laziness II Thes 3:6, 11-12, 13
The excuses they gave are not what is important, but how God wants us to live is. We are responsible to work hard to provide for our physical needs. Notice that while these idlers expect others to help & support them, they are not just sitting around doing nothing – these are not putting time into the physical, here and now things around them. **READ v 6.** They are being ‘disruptive’. They are insisting that the church people change what they are thinking, saying and doing to be more like what they want. **READ v 11.** Instead of being busy fixing up their apartment, going to a paying job, taking care of kids or running a household, they are meddling in the business of others. They are not busy, they are busybodies! **READ v 12.** And they were leeching,

Start to
mooching & sponging off others. They expected others to support them. **While we may not be to the point where we aren't working at all to pay for our room and board – it is easy to think others should do more for us.** We wrongly expect fellow Christians to give us special discounts or deals that others don't get because we are in the same church. We can wrongly expect church members should come over & do work at our house we aren't regularly working at. We can wrongly expect when we go out to eat or do activities, that those who have more should pay. We wrongly go into pity parties because others won't make our lives easier. We can even wrongly expect our parents to do everything for us and if they don't, we think they are unloving! Like when I thought it was unreasonable my parents expected me to pay the additional car insurance that came from me getting my driver's license and wanting to drive!

- C. We are to work hard for our earthly needs II Thes 3:7-10, **12**
So what are we supposed to do? God's point in this passage is that Christians generally should not expect other people to take care of our everyday expenses but we should support ourselves as much as possible. We are to be industrious, hard workers instead of frittering our time away on other things even if we claim it is religious. Paul, Silas and Timothy used themselves as an example.

READ v 7. First, they were not idle – they worked hard. I wish I could say that was true of all Christian missionaries and pastors, but I can't. Fortunately, it is true of most I have known. But there are missionaries, pastors and para-church ministry people who are paid and get little done – they waste time, they sit around dreaming, they let other things consume their time. Christian ministries can have slick materials, inspiring talks and still be idlers.

READ v 7-8. Second, they didn't eat anyone's food without paying for it. They were not freeloaders. They paid their way. If someone in our church has a business, we shouldn't expect them to give us things free or at reduced cost. They may freely choose to do so, but that is their livelihood. They won't have a pay check without a profit (*and God is equally tough on those with businesses, including home ones – don't look at the church family as a way to make a profit for yourself!*).

READ v 8b-9. Third, they went beyond their responsibility. As spiritual teachers, they had a Biblical and cultural right to be paid by those who benefited from their spiritual work. Instead they gave up "their rights" and paid for their expenses by simultaneously working at secular jobs (& receiving some missions support from the Philippian Church). They chose to do that for the greater good – because it would help Jesus' work. For some reason, a bunch of Christians in Thessalonica really struggled with the value of everyday manual labor. Paul and the team wanted to show them that manual labor is not below anyone. They did NOT do this in every city they planted churches in. But they always sacrificed some "right" they could have claimed, for the advancement of God's Kingdom. Which is exactly what God calls every Christian to do – sacrifice some right of ours to help others and the work of the Lord!

Others may not appreciate this – especially when they take our freely given gifts for granted and think we owe them. Some of the people this church has sacrificed the most time, effort and finances on, turn around years later and complain the church isn't doing enough for them. It is going to happen to you and it is nonsense! Just leave that to God to answer and go on helping others because our Lord will make it clear in time AND we will be richly rewarded, especially in the Millennium.

D. We are not to support idlers

II Thes 3:10 (6, 14-15)

What we are NOT to do is continue to support idlers. **READ v 10.** If a person is not WILLING to put some effort in – if they ask for help but don't carry through, THEN our help actually hurts them, Jesus work and us. Some people need to go hungry to be transformed. We had one fellow early on that made every excuse of why he couldn't get a job & work – his heart was bad, the bosses didn't like him, he was discriminated against, he was sure a better job would come soon – the list was endless. We showed grace at first because only time will show you idlers – those who won't or don't get around to work. But then we stopped – as did every one of his family, relatives and friends. After he had burned every relational bridge, he took a hard labor job – 7 days a week. It was only basic needs that finally broke through his dysfunctional thinking & faulty excuses. The loving thing to do is **“if you don't work, you don't eat.”** We are not to enable or support idlers or idleness.

Now some will rightly ask – what about those who can't work – *and by the way, we will all hit that point sometime in life unless we are killed by an accident.* Look back at v 10 - this verse clearly refers to those who **“are unwilling to work.”** The church has always encouraged help for those who genuinely CAN'T work. But even here be careful. As one becoming disabled myself, I can confirm that disabled people want to work! David Santimore trained me well when he first started coming. Let them open a door even if it takes 5 minutes longer – don't take away their dignity. Ask them if they want help – but better yet, patiently wait for them to stutter out words, clumsily put on a coat or move something from one place to another like there is no hurry UNLESS they ask for help. I'll say a little more on this in a couple minutes.

With the early church's emphasis on a sacrificial love and helping people, some who called themselves Christians started to take advantage of other Christians. One of the earliest Christian documents outside of the New Testament is the Didache. In chapter 12, verses 1-5 it says if a traveler comes, the church may help ^{them} ~~him~~ for a few days, **“And if he wishes to settle among you and has a craft, let him work for his bread”** (v3). But the church should reject anyone who is unwilling to work (12:4). Go by actions which are objective, not words – don't continue to help the person who is UNWILLING to work – that is enabling dysfunction. It is unloving and it stifles real transformation.

II. The bigger picture

A. Idleness is undisciplined slackness

Ecc 10:19; Prov 6:10

We will be coming back to these themes and verses later in the summer as we go through verse by verse, but let's step back and see the bigger picture. While there are several different words translated "**idleness**" in the Bible, the general meaning of idleness is "**undisciplined slackness.**" Sometimes that is laziness or deliberate loafing, but many times it comes from being undisciplined or living in a disorderly manner. It is the opposite of diligence which the Bible speaks highly of. Ecclesiastes 10:18 gives us a visual picture of the result of idleness. "**Through laziness, the rafters sag; because of idle hands, the house leaks.**" We've all seen houses around Vermont that are in bad shape. The owners didn't put any regular time or effort into maintenance. They were busy doing other things. They have excuses but in the vast majority of cases it is simply **idleness** – a very poor and unwise choice of time. As Proverbs 6:10 and 24:33 say, "**a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest – and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like a beggar.**" Again, idleness is not always that people do nothing, but there is little discipline in directing their time to important, everyday responsibilities of living life that God expects of all of us.

B. Idle words

Matt 12:36

Interestingly, we can also be "**idle with our words.**" Jesus warns us about this in Matthew 12:36, "**but I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty [i.e. idle] word they have spoken.**" We are going to have to give an account for every idle word we speak. Idle words are undisciplined speech. It's where we just blurt out whatever we feel like. Obscenities, coarse joking, foolish talk, are also considered idle words in Ephesians 5:4.

C. Humans are created to work

(see Jan 2017 sermons)

So why is idleness – this undisciplined use of our time, energy, and words - such a negative thing in the Bible? Because it's the opposite of the biblical view of work! God works. And we are made in God's image. We are made to work. There is a dignity in work. There is no legitimate work that is below us. We glorify God in hard, diligent and persistent work. Work is the main means by which we are to provide for our & our family's needs. When humans don't work, it leads to all kinds of problems including getting into trouble, scarcity, broken relationships, meddling, depression, and an inner loss of the sense of value. Purpose and significance comes from our work – both physical and spiritual work for Jesus. Work came before the fall and we will work in heaven. Idleness keeps us from experiencing the good things God meant to come from our own work.

D. Idleness expands with prosperity

Ezekiel 16:49

Turn to Ezekiel 16:49. This is a fascinating passage as God is giving a last warning to the Jewish people before King Nebuchadnezzar & the Babylonian armies come in to destroy the country and enslave the remnant. God says they have become worse than Sodom which was destroyed centuries before. **READ Ezekiel 16:49-50a.** Notice

the 3 sins of Sodom that they were doing worse: 1st) **arrogance** also translated *pride* in other translations, 2nd) **overfed** also translated *excess of food, abundant food, fullness of food* and ~~*abundance of food*~~, 3rd) **unconcerned** – that is actually *idleness* and the other translations use the words *prosperous ease, careless ease, abundance of idleness and enjoyed carefree ease*. In other words, they no longer valued physical work. An abundance of food and stuff – like we have in America – has led to laziness & an undisciplined poor use of time. Instead of ~~more~~ leading to being grateful and generous, they became selfish. God wants us to work hard so we can help others, not seek to keep everything for ourselves! Helping the poor and needy MORE is what a proper view of **“those who are unwilling to work shall not eat”** should lead to! Not I want to keep more to myself and not be bothered by other’s needs.

When there was more in society

III. Some implications

Let’s end by considering some other practical implications of this warning by God about idleness.

A. In helping others – relief, rehabilitation, development

(“When Helping Hurts – alleviating poverty without hurting the poor ... and yourself”)

When middle class or above people define poverty they emphasize the lack of physical things like food, clothing, shelter, money, etc. So we come in as a savior with a check to rescue the poor unfortunate ones. But the poor around the world define poverty in more psychological or social ways – humiliation, shame, worthless, helpless, inferior, no say, powerless, fear, social isolation. So when a person simply comes in with a check, it actually reinforces the poor people's sense of inferiority, helplessness and humiliation making the poverty worse. ~~☹~~

In the excellent book listed on your outline, **“When Helping Hurts”** – and I’ll get you a free copy if you will do the homework in it – it points out 3 needs in major problems. **The first is relief** – this is where the storm hits & destroys everything. The person has no resources. Relief requires us to do things FOR people. But that stage is over really quickly – in fact most problems never get to this level. **The next need is rehabilitation**. We have some resources, but not enough to complete our task – much like rehabilitating after a bad injury. Here if we do things FOR a person we actually hurt the person & process. But neither can we say, **“just pull yourself up by your bootstraps”**. What helps in this stage is to come ALONGSIDE a person, encourage them to use the skills, abilities & resources they do have even though they won’t be enough – then add to that. **This is what God is saying in regards to idleness.**

Everyone needs to do what they can. So in the OT, God instructed the farmers NOT to harvest all their produce, then invite widows to come harvest the edges. The widows worked to get their food (*preserving human dignity*) even though the widows didn’t have the ability or resources to grow it from scratch or pay for it. There wasn’t an alternate plan for those unwilling to go pick – hunger was the best chance to motivate them past their fear & faulty excuses so they could get back to feeling good about themselves. Those truly unable to do anything were brought food.

Now here is what we miss today – the vast majority of people who come for help **think or feel** they are in the relief stage when they are really in the rehabilitation stage. They almost always have some effort & resources they can do to towards the solution even though it won't quite be enough. What is going to make a positive difference is if they do some and you come alongside to help get over the top. So God's command not to do things for an idler helps us help others in the right way.

B. In retirement

Another implication of the challenge of idleness concerns our retirement. ***What do we picture for retirement?*** Endless games of golf? Sitting on the beach every day? Not having to do anything? If we don't have work and service as a part of our retirement we are wasting our time. As we age, it takes us longer to do lots of stuff – we can't do all we use to do. We do retire from fulltime work. But if you believe the American dream nonsense that real life is where we work 40 or 50 years so we can save up enough money to play & amuse yourself all the time – you will waste your life and you'll face a very displeased Jesus after your death. Don't throw your life away on the foolish, selfish and short-sighted American dream of retirement. Include dreams of using your time and effort to serve Jesus & help others more.

C. Bringing up kids

Another implication of the challenge of idleness concerns bringing up our kids. Since a person shouldn't eat who is unwilling to work – we want to start our kids in chores early in life. Those chores should be ones that help the family, not just clean up after themselves. Let your kids be an invaluable part of the family. This takes much time & patience as kids WANT to do chores until they are old enough to do them well. Ongoing chores that help others – from clearing the table to vacuuming to cleaning the toilet – teach kids the value of work, confirm their value in the family and prepare them for wise use of their time when they leave home. It may be easier to do chores yourself but it is lazy parenting – that is being an idler and training kids to be idlers.

By the way be a good example of hard work yourself

D. In our dreams (conscious, not sleeping! ☺)

Our final implication today of this challenge of idleness concerns our dreams. Do you long for 52 weeks of paid vacation a year? Do you wish you could win the lottery so you don't have to work again? Do you feel jealous for those who have more so they don't have to work? Challenge that dysfunctional thinking – argue with those conscious dreams BECAUSE those things are wanting to be an idler. Ow!

When we teach here at the Barre EFC, it is not so people can point their finger at others to tell them how bad they are. We teach so we will apply this to ourselves to cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work to transform our actions, attitudes & words. I really struggled preparing this sermon because I couldn't stay on track – I wanted to constantly check e-mail, scan the news, day dream. That is idling. It is not that God wants us to work 24/7. He commands daily rest & times of breaks. But we must stop our excuses and take responsibility for our own physical needs & responsibilities!