

Community Organizing  
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2 Thessalonians 3:6-18 (NRSV)

Now 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. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and 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. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this commend; Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. 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. Do not regard them as enemies but warn them as believers. Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you.

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- Don't be lazy!
- Don't be a busybody.
- If you don't work, you don't eat!
  - It's simple, right? What's so hard to understand? It's sounds exactly like something Jesus would say to a new community of believers.
  - Well...not exactly. There's a lot more from this passage than that. As usual, we need to go deeper. Let's set the CONTEXT...
- We're in Thessalonica, a port city in Greece on the Aegean Sea. It was key for trading - with its famous harbor and the Egyptian Road east to Asia.
- We hear of Paul's journey to Thessalonica in Acts 17. He went to the synagogue and preached there for three days. He persuaded many people and started a Christian community hosted by Jason. Then, he upsets one too many people with his Messiah-talk, so they form a mob, start a riot in the city and Paul has to flee for his life to Barea.
- This is a letter, a second letter, written by Paul (and Silas and Timothy) to the fledgling community of believers in Thessalonica.

- As a letter, it's meant to be personal, not just generic. Paul, Silas and Timothy cared for these people, very much.
- It's a SECOND letter. So, maybe knowing what was said in the first letter might be important. Here are some highlights...
  - Paul celebrates their faithfulness and reaffirms their conversion. He acknowledges their belief in the God of Israel and how their decision to follow the way of Jesus isolates them and gets them banished and persecuted. Christians will suffer, but they will do so together and as part of the story of Jesus.
  - Paul reminds them that the way of Jesus is about being a community in healthy, loving relationships and in humble service, not power.
  - It upsets Paul to hear that of their suffering, but when Timothy reports back to Paul that the Thessalonian community is actually growing and doing well, despite their persecution, he rejoices and encourages them to endure.
    - In 4:9-12 he tells them, "You don't need us to write about loving your brothers and sisters because God has already taught you to love each other. In fact, you are doing loving deeds for all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. Now we encourage you, brothers and sisters, to do so even more. Aim to live quietly, mind your own business, and earn your own living, just as I told you. That way you'll behave appropriately toward outsiders, and you won't be in need.
    - Paul tells them, make sure you are known through the city as reliable and hard-working. Not just hard-working so that you can make lots of money, but so you have enough resources for yourself AND TO LOVE IN A WAY THAT BINDS THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY TOGETHER.
    - He ends the 1<sup>st</sup> letter telling them to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak and be patient with all of them.
- So, the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter. Some time has passed...
  - Paul hears that the believers in Thessalonica are continuing to be persecuted. There is mounting hostilities from neighbors. Talk of the imminent apocalypse is rampant – the end is near! Paul reminds them to rely upon God.
  - Word is that many of the believers are starting to behave in ways that are against the teachings of Christ – not according to the traditions they were taught. So, in chapter three, Paul talks about the inner workings of the community, providing instructions to them. "Do not be weary in doing what is right."
  - Like the 1<sup>st</sup> letter, he ends the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter telling them to admonish the idlers – caution them.

When you go deeper and listen for the gospel, you realize that it all comes back to community. What a Christian community is; what it looks like, how it operates, how it supports and flourishes. We need to remember that this community was a persecuted, minority community that depended on each other. They couldn't participate in commerce and regular economic

activities like others, so they HAD to depend on each other. Paul was not giving them reasons to kick out those who weren't helping, but trying to guide them to see how important it was that they rely on one another; to focus on individual needs and goals would be detrimental.

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So often, these words from Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians are cherry-picked and proof-texted by those with a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps, self-made-man ethic" to support an American political ideal that castigates those in poverty and rails against the 21<sup>st</sup> century welfare state. These words from Paul are misused and abused by so-called Christians, who think that Jesus advocated an "if you don't work, you don't eat" philosophy, which is far from the truth.

In September 2013, Kevin Cramer, then a representative from North Dakota (now a senator), voted to pass H.R. 3102<sup>1</sup>, the Nutrition Reform and Work Opportunity Act. Long story short, one of the major results of the bill drastically affected the food stamp program known as SNAP<sup>2</sup>, eliminating approximately 3.8 million people from receiving benefits. This included 1.8 million low-income senior citizens and low-income working families, 170,000 veterans, and 210,000 children (losing their school lunches)<sup>3</sup>.

One of Rep. Cramer's constituents, clearly upset with the congressman's vote, posted on the congressman's Facebook page, the scripture passage from Matthew 25:36-43. It's the passage in which Jesus says, "I was hungry, and you fed me, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, etc." The disciples respond by saying, "when were you hungry and we fed you? When were you thirsty and we gave you something to drink?" Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me."

Rep. Cramer responded to this by quoting 2 Thessalonians 3:10: "For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat."

It is a failure to understand Paul's entire message. Rep. Cramer used this verse to say that poor people are lazy and shouldn't get help. It's a mistake to think that Paul was simply talking about laziness, when he was talking about so much more.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/3102>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ontheissues.org/Economic/Kevin\\_Cramer\\_Welfare+\\_Poverty.htm](https://www.ontheissues.org/Economic/Kevin_Cramer_Welfare+_Poverty.htm)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.politicususa.com/2013/09/19/cruel-house-republicans-vote-cut-food-170000-vets-3-8-million-americans.html>

“To early Christians, work and prosperity were not signs of individual grace but, rather, evidence of supporting oneself and thereby the whole community. To refuse to work was therefore to rebel and take unfair advantage of others, and this was the problem, not mere idleness.”<sup>4</sup>

It’s important to point out the Greek word here that gets translated as laziness – it is ATAKTOS. In the Greek, ATAKTOS could be understood as idle, undisciplined, disorderly or disruptive. When we understand the fullness of the original Greek word, we understand that what Paul was warning against was, “not about laziness, but about being disruptive, not contributing but rather disturbing the community- the Greek literally says, those “who are “not working, but working around.” They do not do their own work, but busy themselves with the work of other people.”<sup>5</sup>

It comes back to community.

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^ Pilgrimages to monastic communities have become popular for Christians around the globe, especially young people. One destination in particular draws thousands of young people each summer. It a small, ecumenical monastic community in the south of France, named Taizé. When young people aren’t there, however, it consists of more than 100 brothers from Catholic and Protestant traditions who have come from about 30 countries around the world.

The community was founded in 1940 by Brother Roger Schutz, who yearned to live a different expression of the Christian life. After he founded Taizé and it began to grow, he wrote The Rule of Taizé, expressing his vision of community life, which was centered on being a living sign for the world. Along with his hopes and dreams, it also included basic rules about the practices of monastic life: prayer, work, hospitality, celibacy, pooling of goods, and other practices. The brothers aren’t the only ones who are invited into the monastic life, however; it is open to pilgrims as well.

When one goes on pilgrimage to Taizé, one is invited into the life of prayer, work and hospitality. You don’t come to Taizé as a tourist. You come as a pilgrim. You, the pilgrim, are invited into the inner workings of the Christian body, which deepens the relationship with others and your experience of God. Pilgrims to Taizé are expected to attend prayer services with the brothers three times a day, attend Bible study or workshops, and labor at various jobs. This requirement might seem like a burden at first, but most people find that it turns out to be very fulfilling at Taizé.

Pilgrims who have been to Taizé or to similar monastic communities report that no one complains about the work they have been assigned to do. You can hear groups of workers

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Blogdett, Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

<sup>5</sup> (Gaventa, Interpretation: First and Second Thessalonians)

singing from the kitchen, laughing as they rake and do landscaping, and greeting one another early in the morning. Perhaps this joyful attitude is because by doing work, pilgrims are invited to the inner workings of the community and are building deeper, more meaningful relationships with each other and with God.

This experience isn't unique to Taizé. There are other modern monastic communities that give pilgrims the opportunity to serve in the working life of the community. Whether preparing meals, washing dishes, tending gardens, maintaining the grounds or doing other simple chores, these tasks deepen the pilgrims' experiences and appreciation of the ministry, and it allows them to join in communion with others whom they may otherwise not encounter.

These rules and practices aren't just seen in today's monastic communities, though. The Rule of Saint Benedict is one of the most famous of these, and Benedict wrote his rule in the sixth century. Saint Benedict believed that when the community shared in their common life, it alleviated tensions among them. They would cook, eat, work, live and pray together. He took into consideration the differences of ability and accommodated everyone's skill. All people worked as they were able, and they were encouraged to do what they could to contribute to the success of the community.

But it even goes back before Saint Benedict — all the way back to the first followers of Jesus. These early communities spent time discerning how they would live peaceably but didn't always succeed. The community at Thessalonica was one of those that had difficulty. ^

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Paul's warning of believers living in idleness was to point out those in the community whose actions were purposely disrupting the health and wholeness of the community. Paul instructs on those **UNWILLING** or who **REFUSE** to work. The "mere busybodies," were pre-occupied with gossip and activities that weren't beneficial to the community as a whole. They are the ones who should be avoided.

BUT...

Christian believers must not forget Jesus' commandments to love God and love one another. Loving the members of our community means that while each person must work and contribute according to his or her abilities, we must also hold one another accountable. Paul says to avoid them so they will feel shame, but do not regard them as enemies. Still love them. Warn them, so that they may come to understand that work and contributions in a Christian community aren't primarily about making a living, but about working for the Kingdom of God.

Paul believed that when the people worked for the reign of God, it enabled the freedom of the children of God. When we seek the kingdom of God, we too are living in such freedom. Freedom is not life with no responsibilities, but rather is living with others in equality and mutual accountability. We don't have to take pilgrimages to experience and build this kind of

Christian community. Here within the walls of our church we are a community --- built on equality and mutual accountability.

- Don't be lazy!
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Like the Thessalonian Christians, we too have our faults and so community doesn't happen automatically, but it's always our intention. Part of living the Christian life is learning how to be part of the community of faith; how to be a community organizer. The rewards are great, the fellowship is real, and the freedom Christ gives us is a blessing. Let us seek always to live in mutual accountability to each other in community, for the good of all, and to be God's people not only in our broad proclamations but also in the daily practices of life together as followers of Christ.

AMEN.