

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *In Times Like These 5*

Dedication

September 3, 2023

**2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 (NIV)**

*In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. <sup>7</sup> For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup> nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. <sup>9</sup> We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. <sup>10</sup> For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."*

*<sup>11</sup> We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. <sup>12</sup> Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. <sup>13</sup> And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.*

*<sup>14</sup> Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. <sup>15</sup> Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer.*

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As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table today, I invite you to turn back to the passage that was read for us earlier. Second Thessalonians, Chapter 3, beginning with verse 6.

I intended this series in which we've been the last few weeks to review some characteristics of God that are particularly needed and helpful, and revealing of who He is, for times like these in which we live.

We've looked at how we can find in God, and how others should find in us, His followers, the characteristics of *mercy, truth, forgiveness, and hope*.

Today, in honor of Labor Day, we're considering God's characteristic, and the Christ-followers' characteristic, of *dedication*.

Dedication.

Different words that convey this idea are: dependability, faithfulness, consistency, devotion, perseverance. But I chose *dedication*.

And I'll give you the take-away right off the bat. Here's the sermon in a sentence: "We can trust that God is utterly dedicated to His work and purposes, and so the world ought to see that same sort of dedication in us."

We can trust that God is utterly dedicated to His work and purposes, and so the world ought to see that same sort of dedication in us.

God's character — His way of doing things — is filled with integrity.

God does not walk away from His responsibilities.

He does what He says He will do,  
and He does it on time,  
and He does it whether He feels like it or not,  
and He does it with excellence.  
That's just who God is.

And because of that — because of God's dedicated character — we benefit: we live peacefully and confidently knowing that God is "on the job," if you will.

You and I, we don't get up in the morning and wonder if there will be air for us to breathe today, or if gravity is going to work today, or if the sun is going to rise today.

No, God sustains life, period.

We never have to wonder if God's character has changed, or if He's in a bad mood today, or if He's still out for our best and willing to help us.

We don't have to wonder if what He said yesterday still applies today, or if He's changed His mind about things based on how much sleep He got last night.

No, God does not work that way. God doesn't change.

Scripture tells us this.

*God is the same, yesterday, today and forever.*

Hebrews 13:8

*Every good and perfect gift comes from God, who does not change like shifting shadows.* James 1:17

*He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it.* Philippians 1:6

*The love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never end; they are new every morning.* Lamentations 3:22

And on and on.

But, not only does Scripture speak to God's utter dedication to us, life itself bears witness to it.

Nature reveals it.

Science declares it.

Our spirits within us affirm it.

In everything God is and is about, God invests "the dignity of effort." That's Matt Zahniser's phrase from 20 years ago.<sup>i</sup>

God does what He says He'll do, and He does it faithfully, consistently and excellently.

His character is one of dedication, and we, along with all the world, can count on that.

That is the declaration: we and all the world can count on God's utter dedication to His purpose.

So then, here's the implication: the world around us should see that same sort of character in us, in those who follow Him.

If we sit at the table of God as His adopted sons and daughters, if we carry the name of Jesus, God's Son, then we absolutely should share in His character.

We should be faithful, consistent, devoted — dedicated.

We should show up for the work we're given to do — whatever that is: our job, our calling, our ministry, our roles as husband, wife, parent, child, student...

And we should show up on time, and do what we're called to do, whether we feel like it or not; do it with integrity, with excellence, and with the dignity of effort.

To do less is not just to be less than God calls us to be, but it also is to choose to participate in the fallen nature of our world, instead of the redeemed nature of our Savior.

This was Paul's message to the Thessalonian church.

He wrote to make sure they understood that work is not a consequence of the fall in Eden. Not at all.

God put Adam and Eve in the garden, in fact, to work it.

What *is* a consequence of the fall in Eden is the human drive to *get out of working*.

The tendency to laziness, to do as little as possible and to cut corners wherever we can (even if those cut corners are illegal, immoral, dangerous or harmful to other people), the drive to do the minimum, so we have more time to do what we like for our own pleasure: that way of thinking *is* a consequence of the fall, and it is part of humanity's fallen nature.

And we all know that.

We've all either lived it in the past or we are still living it today, and we see it clearly around us: in marriages, in families, in businesses and in government. More than ever before, there seems to be this attitude washing over our nation that says it is just fine to do the very least you can get away with doing. And *that is completely contrary to the character of God*.

You want evidence of that? Look at creation.

God didn't have to make thousands of different kinds of birds and bugs and plants and animals, and He didn't have to make them with all the different colors and shapes and sizes. They could all be one shape and size, and they could all be brown or gray.

God could have invested just enough effort to get the job done—just enough to get by.

But He did not! He invested the dignity of effort in the work He did, and He did it for the sake of beauty and love, for His own glory.

Dedication to work and purpose is part of His character, and it was part of human character before the fall.

And part of the work of Jesus is to restore that part of God's character in us.

The Thessalonians needed to hear that, because, though they were forgiven and redeemed followers of Jesus, that part of their hearts had not yet been transformed.

Some there were content to live off the labor of others, content "to be idle," as Paul writes.

Now granted, part of this was due to their thinking that Jesus was returning at any moment, so they saw no need to work and plan for the future.

But as the weeks went on and that proved not to be the case, still, they were resistant to changing their habits.

We know that because Paul had to address this twice: once in the fourth chapter of his first letter to the Thessalonians, and here, again and more forcefully, in his second letter.

Paul wrote a similar thing to Timothy, so the problem wasn't just in Thessalonica (1 Tim. 5:3-16).

Actually, you can tell how significant the problem was by how much space Paul gives to its remediation, and by the clear tone of authority in his words.

This was a big deal to Paul, and listen, we're talking here about able-bodied people who can work, not those who truly cannot, right?

Paul knew that once people who *can* work get used to living off the work of others, it's very hard to reverse that course. That's why the welfare mindset passes through generations like DNA. To change that way of thinking usually takes nothing less than the transforming work of Jesus.

That's why government welfare programs alone almost never make any lasting change in people. In fact, helping people not to work usually causes them to become "disruptive." That's Paul's word for it there in verse 11.

Welfare programs alone—or "giveaways" or "transfer payments" or whatever you call them—almost always perpetuate more welfare programs, because once people get used to not working, it almost always takes nothing less than spiritual transformation to turn that around.

It involves the realization, the conviction, that followers of Jesus cannot simply live their lives always taking from others, because that approach to life is completely out of step with the *giving* character of the God who redeemed them.

If Jesus had chosen to just slide by in life, doing only the minimum and never giving the dignity of effort, where would you and I be today?

That approach to life is contrary to the character of God, and we who bear His name cannot be found in that camp.

Paul says Christians shouldn't even associate with people who won't see the truth in this, so they might come to their senses. That's how big a deal it was to him.

*The fact is, taking to heart this message of dedication to work and purpose could be one of the most culturally transforming things the church could ever do!*

More and more, the prevailing notion today in our society is to avoid work if possible, and if not, to do the least we can get away with doing.

How powerful could the Christian witness be if followers of Jesus actually followed Jesus in doing the absolute best job we can at whatever we are given to do—going above and beyond, giving all we do the dignity of effort, for the sake of the glory of God?

What a witness for Christ that would be! How different from most of those around us!

So, when our boss or our teacher or whoever notices this, comes to us and says, "You know, everyone else here is just slogging along, but you're different: you're invested; you're dedicated. How come you're so engaged when everyone else here is barely squeaking by?"

We could say to them, "Well, that's just the nature of the God I serve. That's the character of the Savior who chose to die to save my soul."

Man, talk about counter-cultural!

Think of it! All the strategies and complicated plans the church has come up with for evangelism through the years: what if the most powerful witnessing tool to our culture was simply Christians actually showing up for work, working hard, returning people's messages, being

on time, doing our duty as spouses and children and parents and church members, not expecting a handout, giving the dignity of effort, for the sake of the success of our employer, sure, but ultimately, for the sake of the glory of God?

How might that sort of transformed soul transform our culture?

Here's the question: what part of your and my approach to life and work doesn't reflect God's dedication to purpose? What part of our approach doesn't match up with Jesus' dedication?

Where in our thinking about work does God want to make us more like Himself: more like Jesus, who, remember, *"being in very nature God—chose to make Himself nothing by taking the nature of a servant—humbling Himself even to the point of becoming obedient to—even death on a cross!"* (Phil. 2:6-8)

That is dedication to purpose, you see? That's the character of God.

And that's the character God wants us all to share in—for the sake of His glory in our world.

It was just that sort of dedication that Jesus showed that night around the table with His friends. The days to come would not be pleasant, and all these friends would leave Him, sooner or later, in one way or another.

But Jesus had a job to do, and He gave Himself to do it.

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *Reaching for Excellence*

Benediction: One more quick thing in this passage that I want to note is that the Apostle Paul cites himself as an example, saying to them, in verse seven there, that *"you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example."*

The word "ought," coming from the Apostle Paul, is a "will of God" word.

The fact is, living successfully takes work. Jesus knew that; Paul knew that; we, as Christ-followers, need to know it too.

Providing for a family takes work, being a parent takes work, being a leader or a follower: all take work. Doing anything of any significance takes work. That's the way life is in our world.

And realizing and embracing that may be the one thing that gets our culture's attention: dedication to doing what we've been given to do—for the sake of Christ—who did the same for us.

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<sup>i</sup> Zahmiser, A. H. Mathias. Professor Emeritus of Christian Mission at Asbury Theological Seminary; former member of WFMC.