

“Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

We are in the last days of the church year, days that remind us that the Lord is coming soon. When Jesus spoke of the last days, the disciples asked Him: *“Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?”* (Luke 21:7, ESV) Jesus gave them a long list of the things that will take place before the day when, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, *He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead. [His] kingdom will have no end.* That glorious day has been foretold throughout all of Scripture. In our Old Testament lesson today, Malachi says: *“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”* (Malachi 4:1-2, ESV) Jesus assures us that these days should not frighten us, but give us hope. He tells us: *“Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”* (Luke 21:28, ESV) This is our confidence. This is why the church prays, “Come, Lord Jesus!” That prayer is more and more necessary as we look to the world around us. Lord, come quickly to deliver your people. Come quickly, to deliver us from the evil that is around us.

While there are many who deny His coming, the Lord indeed has appointed a time for His glorious, triumphant return to bring His church into the glory of His eternal Kingdom. We sang it in the opening hymn: *The day is surely drawing near When Jesus, God’s anointed. In all His power shall appear As judge whom God appointed.* (LSB 508, st. 1) Our text today ponders that coming day and reminds us there are things we are to do while we wait for the Lord to come again.

A cardinal rushed into the pope’s office in the Vatican one day, flustered and out of breath. “Your holiness! Your holiness! The Lord has returned! What shall we do?” The pope thought for a moment and replied: “Look busy.”

I do not tell that story to pick on the Roman church. After all, we could go into the office of any national or international church body and say the same thing. It is true of congregations. It is true for us as members of this congregation. If the Lord would return right now, would He commend us for being about the tasks He has given His church to do? Or, would we want to look busy—as if somehow we could keep the Lord from realizing that there are times when we are idle and indifferent to His will for us and for His church in these days?

The church in Thessalonica struggled with what to do while it was waiting for the Lord’s return. Second Thessalonians is one of the earliest New Testament documents, penned in Corinth a few weeks after 1 Thessalonians, around AD 50 or 51. Paul had been led by the Holy Spirit to go to Macedonia, where he was able to establish a church in Philippi. Things didn’t always go well in Philippi for Paul and Silas, so they travelled to Thessalonica. The Word of the Lord gave birth to a congregation in that city, yet this brought a negative reaction from the Jewish community, and so they continued on to Berea, then to Athens, and to Corinth. While there, Paul received uplifting news from the Thessalonians on progress in their Christian life, but he also heard of their hardships because of the faith and their worries about the fate of those who had died before the second coming of Jesus. Paul writes to encourage them to stay firm in their faith, to continue to abound in love for one another, and to be ready and to take comfort in the coming of the Lord. Paul also assured them: *“For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.”* (1 Thessalonians 4:15-16, ESV)

Some in the church misunderstood what Paul said. Now an update from Thessalonica motivates Paul, through the Holy Spirit, to write a second letter just weeks later. We see his concerns in our text today: ***For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.*** The teaching about Christ's return was being used by some as an excuse to quit work and to stop providing for their own needs. Their behaviour was disruptive and was having a negative influence on the spirit and unity of the Christian church which Paul had begun there. Paul urges the members to avoid idleness and to avoid those who are idle. Yes, the Lord is coming, but this isn't a time for idleness. It isn't a time to shirk our responsibilities. While we wait there are things that God would have His church doing in the world and for the sake of the world. There are the things that He would have us do in our day to day lives. Paul sums it up with the simple words, ***As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.***

Those words are not simply an exhortation to be nice to others. Yes, we should do good to others, loving our neighbour as ourselves. Yet there is much more to it. Paul is telling us that as Christians we should continue to do what comes naturally. The forgiveness and life we have through Christ's death for us on the cross mould our lives to make us ready for His coming. His glorious resurrection gives us a new life to be lived in Him and for Him. We are one in Christ. We are baptized into Christ. When we welcome a new member through Baptism we say: "*We welcome you into the Lord's family. We receive you as a fellow member of the body of Christ . . . to work with us in his kingdom*" (LW p. 204) Notice there is no suggestion of idleness. We live together in Christ. We serve together in Christ. We do what we can for one another, but we also do what we can to bring the good news of Christ to the world that is so in need of His Gospel promise, even if many refuse to believe it.

Only a small percentage of our life takes place within the four walls of the church. Most of our time is spent doing our job, whether that is in an office, a hospital, a school or our homes. What Paul wants us to realize is that everything we receive in our time together here on Sunday leads us through the rest of the week. Paul says to all of us: "***And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.***" (Colossians 3:17, ESV) Paul sites his own example. He says: ***For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.*** A tent maker by trade, Paul continued that work or he did some other job to provide for his daily needs. Paul understood that he had the right to be supported for his ministry. He said elsewhere: "***Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."***" (1 Timothy 5:17-18, ESV) But he is setting an example for the people. Yes, the Lord is coming again. Paul was clear on that in both his letters to the Thessalonians. But at no time does he suggest that the church should sit back and do nothing. Follow my example, Paul says. Paul grants that his work as tent maker and preacher was hard work. Yes, he can claim an income, but under the circumstances in Thessalonica, he chose to be bi-vocational, what we might call a worker-priest. In this way he lessened the burden on the congregation and gave them an example. While we wait, Paul says, we have things to do. Let's make sure we're doing them!

It is good to be doing what the Lord would have us do while we wait for His return. I've always thought that my father's favourite bible verse was from this text, because more than once I heard dad say to us: Remember, ***If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.*** When we didn't want to work in the garden, there was dad: if you're not willing to work, you can't eat. If I didn't want to cut the lawn I received the same admonition. This isn't about those who can't work. It is about the willingness to work. Yes, work is important. That reminds me of something my grandmother always said, something I'm sure you've heard before: Idle hands are the devil's plaything. That is the problem that Paul was confronting. It wasn't just that people were idle. It wasn't that they weren't busy. Paul notes: ***For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.*** As busybodies, they had time on their hands and used it to meddle in the affairs of others. They were gossips. They were stirring up trouble. They were doing all the other things that we associate with busybodies and this was creating problems for the church.

There is a cure for idleness and that is to work as the Lord enables. This is not a call to become workaholics. Paul had something similar to say to the church in Ephesus: ***Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.***" (Ephesians 5:15-16, ESV) While we wait, we are not idle. We are not just looking busy. We are busy! We are busy fulfilling our vocations, those day to day tasks and responsibilities that we have. We are busy, seeking to do the good that we can in the world. For us as God's people that involves the work of the Gospel. We do good as we share with others the glorious hope we have in the midst of this fallen world—the hope that is ours in the Saviour, who died to wash away our sins, but who lives so that we may live in Him. We do good, as we work with one another in this congregation to be a blessing to one another. We do good as we pray for one another, as we care for one another, as we love and serve with one another. Think of our dear Lord and Saviour, who never tired of doing good, even to the point of giving

Himself for us on the cross. His example leads us as we prepare for His coming.

The Lord is coming soon. Paul knew it. We should know it. When will that be? Only the Lord Himself knows, but while we wait we will stay active and busy, doing all He calls us to do. We will, with the help of the Holy Spirit, heed the simple advice of Scripture: ***“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”*** (Galatians 6:10, ESV) Amen.