

Paul closes the letter to the Thessalonians by talking about a different problem which they had. It seems that some in Thessalonica had become idle. They were refusing to work. And the reason they were probably doing that was because they figured Christ had already come, so what was the point of doing anything? Why should they have to work at all? So Paul is writing, then, to correct this problem and to show them what it is that they should be doing.

Now, I want to be very clear about something right away at the start here. We might hear Paul talking about idleness and think that this doesn't actually apply to us. Because we figure we live in a culture that likes to be busy. We like to work. Idleness is not really our problem, so maybe we can just kind of tune this out. But the word translated as "idleness" here is actually a military term. It describes a soldier who is undisciplined, a soldier who is not doing his job. The word can also mean something like "disorderly," which is how it's translated in the King James Bible, or being "out of line," or even "insubordinate." It's a soldier who's not doing what he supposed to do. Because a group of soldiers depend on each other to survive. They need one another, or else they're not going to win the battle. But when one of them is undisciplined, when one's not doing his job, the whole group is at risk. If you have a line of soldiers, especially when you're fighting hand-to-hand, the weakest point is where they're going to break through. A wall is only as good as its weakest point. A chain is only as good as its weakest link. That's where everything's going to break down. So a soldier who's not doing his job, a soldier who is undisciplined puts the whole group in danger, even if he's otherwise good at what he does. That doesn't matter. His lack of discipline makes him a risk for everybody else.

Now, Christians, Paul calls the Christian life like being a soldier very often in the Bible. In Galatians 5, verse 16, for example, Paul calls for us to "walk in step with the Spirit." Like an army on the march where they step at the same time, where they're doing the same things. That's what it means to be a Christian, to walk in step with the Spirit. Or in Ephesians chapter 6, Paul calls for us to put on the "whole armor of God" so that we might be able to carry out spiritual warfare. Or in 2 Timothy 2, verse 3, he says: "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." So we as Christians are called to be good soldiers, to be disciplined soldiers of Jesus Christ. Because if we aren't, we put the whole church at risk.

That's what was happening in Thessalonica. These men who were unwilling to work, who were not doing what they were supposed to be doing were causing problems for the rest of the church. And they were also relying on those other Christians in order to find support, in order to get their daily needs. Now, there's nothing wrong in that, of getting support from other Christians. In fact, 1 Timothy chapter 5 commands us to provide for widows. We as the church are called to take care of one another even in physical needs, especially for those who are in the congregation. Getting help from other Christians wasn't the problem. The problem is that because they were not working, and because they were relying on everyone else, they were giving an opportunity to sin. Because instead of being diligent in their work, instead of being orderly, they had become busybodies. They had become gossips. They had become snoops, always in everybody else's business, always trying to pay attention to what other people are doing, going from house to house stirring up sin in the congregation. They were so focused on the problems of everyone else that they were causing problems for the whole church. Because they had become a worse enemy to the church than even those who are outside, because by acting in this disorderly way, they had given an opportunity to Satan to tear the church apart.

Christians, the reason why I emphasize this is because I don't want us to think that we are safe from this danger. Just because we don't like being idle, just because we tend to work very hard doesn't mean that we can't become disorderly. And this can happen in a couple of different ways. We can become disorderly whenever we are focused on the sins of other people, when we become busybodies, when we become gossips, snoops, always paying attention to what our neighbor is doing. Christians, we have enough sins all by ourselves to worry about. But when we are so focused on the sins of other people and trying to criticize them, and when we are unforgiving of those sins, we become a problem for the church. We invite opportunities to sin and tear the church apart.

And the other way that we might become disorderly is that we might misunderstand what Paul is telling us here. We might think that what he is saying gives us an excuse to be hardhearted, that we don't need to take care of one another. Or that we even don't need to get help from one another, because I can take care of things myself. But Christians, we are called to be good soldiers of Christ to help one another, to care for one another, to make sure that our needs are taken care of. Because the busybody tears down the church, but the good soldier of Christ builds it up. So that's why we need to be careful of this, so that we don't fall into the same temptation that the Thessalonians did.

And so Paul exhorts the Thessalonians and us by calling on us to stay away from those who are doing this, to stay away from those who are being busybodies. Now, he doesn't mean by this that we should treat them like enemies and cast them out of the church or anything like that. In fact, he explicitly says, "Treat them like a brother." What he means is that we should not indulge them. We should not give them an opportunity to continue in that sin, so that when they see what we are doing by our example, they would become ashamed of that sin and turn away from it, so that the church might be built up again.

And Paul also says to those who are doing this in verse 10: "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat." Now, he doesn't mean by this: "Take away their food or don't give them anything." That would be wicked. That would be a very evil thing to do. That's not what Paul means. What he means is what he says in verse 12: "Such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living." Those who can work should do so, because in this way they build up the entire church. And they're able not only to take care of themselves, but also those who are truly in need. The whole army will be united if we are walking together as Christians.

And to really drive home this point, Paul points to himself as an example. Because he says that when he was still among them, he supported himself. He didn't get any money from them. He basically had two jobs. On the one hand, he preached the Gospel, and he didn't get paid for that. And on the other hand, he made tents, and that's how he got his money. That's how he made his living. Now, did he have to do that? Was he obligated to work this way? Absolutely not. And was it wrong to be paid for his preaching? No. Because as he says in verse 9: "It was not because we do not have that right." In other words, he is saying a pastor should be paid for preaching and teaching in the Word. Because that's his work. That is his labor. But what he's saying is that he chose not to do this. Paul chose to forgo this right, so that he would be an example, both to them

and to us. An example of what it means to be a good soldier. An example of what it means to work quietly in the Lord. If they wanted to know what Paul was talking about, they only had to look at him.

So what does this all mean for us, then? It means, first of all, that we should do the work that God has given us to do. Our Commander has given us our orders, and we should carry them out, because not doing them will make us disorderly. It will give us an opportunity to sin. Rather, as good soldiers, let us do what God has called for us to do. As good soldiers, let us care for one another, especially those here in the congregation. As good soldiers, let us not grow weary in doing good, because Jesus, our Commander, has called us to do this. And he has given us an example in himself of what it means to love one another, just as he first loved us. Let us do what God has called us to do as good soldiers of Christ.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have bound us together into one body in your Son, Jesus Christ. We pray that you would help us always to care for one another, so that your church may be built up in him. In his name we pray. Amen.