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Proper 28 • 2 Thessalonians 3:(1–5) 6–13 • November 17, 2013

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Verses 13–15: Paul reminds these believers of what God has done for them in calling them by the gospel; that they are chosen by God as the first fruit for salvation. Paul therefore urges these believers to stand firm and hold onto the traditions that he taught them. Thus Paul sets up his authentic teaching given via word and epistle (v. 15) in opposition to the false teachings that were only said to come from him via word and epistle (v. 3). Paul concludes this section with a benediction in which he prays that God will give to these believers comfort and hope and to establish them in every good work and word.

Considerations for Preaching

Paul’s purpose is to quell fears that the day of the Lord has already come, to confirm these believers in their call to faith, and to urge them to hold onto true teachings about the coming of Jesus. The preacher should have a similar purpose as he preaches on this text today—to remind his hearers of their call to faith and salvation by the preaching of the gospel and by the sanctification of the Holy Spirit and to urge them to hold onto what the church has received as now contained in Scripture, the ancient creeds, and the Confessions as they await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In our present context we face different misconceptions about the second coming of Jesus, yet false teachings about the end still abound. Consider, for instance, the recent example of Harold Camping who urged believers to stop attending church and made failed predictions of the last day; teachings and predictions that deceived some. We are not to be deceived or alarmed by such false teachings, but to stand firm in what we have received.

Though Paul’s purpose here appears to be quite plain, there is vast disagreement among interpreters today regarding the referents of the various things that Paul describes in vv. 3–12. The Reformers and the Lutheran Confessions identify the man of lawlessness with the Roman papacy and argued that the temple of God is meant to be understood nonliterally and refers to the church. From a classical Lutheran perspective (as well as a preterist perspective), the apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness have already taken place. The last day has not yet come, but today there is nothing that necessitates that it be delayed.

David I. Lewis

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Since becoming a seminary professor, I have been unpleasantly surprised at the number of lay people who have told me that they do not believe their parish pastor is working very hard. Note that this is their perception, and is not necessarily truth. They have said things like, “Our pastor preaches and teaches on Sunday morning, attends a few meetings and does a few pastoral visits, but not much else that we see.” When I have been allowed to inquire about why they have such a perception, often they have
misguided assumptions about how many hours it takes to do certain pastoral functions. I have had lay leaders tell me that they think it takes a pastor less than an hour to plan a worship service and only two to three hours to write a sermon. They have been surprised (but not always convinced) when I told them those pastoral functions often take five times longer than their estimate, and that other pastoral functions are done in private settings that a layperson never sees.

I state this as prologue to the pastor’s decision about text and context. I assume that there are some pastors who do not work as many hours as they should, but I also assume that if you are taking the time to read *Concordia Journal* in preparation for your preaching task, you are probably not one of those. Yet, it is good for you to know that some lay people might perceive your labor as less burdensome than it is. If you think that a plurality of your listeners have that perception, you might either consider not preaching on this text (although you could allude to it if you preach on the Malachi 4 or Luke 21 lessons), or to include some evidence in your sermon of your toil among and with them (although you would have to be careful not to sound defensive or self-serving).

Preaching on the theology of labor presented in this text is also complicated by the economics of the time and region. If many of your congregants are retired, or are unemployed or under-employed because of conditions that are largely out of their control, preaching generically on this text could bring about an unintended shame. Others may be addicted to their work and see this text as a rationale for their overwork and, therefore, under-attention to their other vocations in life.

But we are called upon to proclaim the “whole counsel of God.” If you do believe that this “stewardship of labor” message is important for your listeners to hear, here are some suggestions:

Introduction: Our God is a working God. When he first introduces himself to us in Genesis 1, he is busy creating the entire universe in just six days. He speaks, and with the word of his mouth, he creates light and water and dry land and vegetation and sun and moon and stars and living creatures and then Adam. Then after he had worked for six days, he rested and blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Gn 2:3). He placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, a paradise. But when we think of paradise, we’re often prone to thinking mainly of leisure, like some tropical vacation paradise where it is other people’s jobs to take care of the vacationers. Yet when “the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden,” he did so with the design that Adam (and Eve) were “to work it and keep it” (Gn 2:15). We sometimes think that our work-a-day existence is only a result of our sin-filled situation, but God gave work to our kind even before the fall, and work was good.

Unfortunately Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent, doubted God’s plan for their lives, ate the fruit and fell into sin. The LORD God sent them out from the garden of Eden to continue to work the ground (2:23), but before he sent them out, he said to Adam “cursed is the ground because of you … thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you … By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground for out of it you were taken; for you are dust and to dust you shall return.” The fall into sin surely did complicate work, make it much more difficult, for some people
even dangerous, but work in and of itself is a good gift from God, something he created for us all to do.

We see continued evidence of that in the rest of Scripture (examples could include Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, the prophets, the apostles as fishermen, Paul a tent maker, and of course, our Lord Jesus as a carpenter).

However, our Lord Jesus did not come into the world just to model hard work for us. His was a much larger calling, the largest vocation. The word made flesh made all things at creation (Jn 1:3), but 2000 years ago he came to recreate all things through his suffering, sacrificial death, and resurrection.

Like us, the Christians in Thessalonica had been called by the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of Paul (Acts 17) to trust in Jesus Christ for their rescue in this dead and dying world (passive, vertical righteousness, our identity is in Christ).

But some of them “missed the memo” about how we are to respond to this gracious gift of salvation, by loving our neighbor and being about our various vocations in this life (active, horizontal righteousness). We don’t fully know the motivation of the idlers. They may have been misusing the charitableness of more well-to-do believers (Acts 17:4) or they may have been so fixated on Christ’s return that they neglected their current vocations.

How does Paul’s instruction to the Thessalonian believers apply to us still today? (This is where the pastor will need to know his own congregation and community to best know how to encourage the able to “earn their own living” and “not grow weary at doing good” [cf. 1 Cor 15:58, Gal 6: 9–10].) To all, but especially to those who are less able to work because of disability or age, encourage them to be praying for you and other pastors and church workers (v. 1) so that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored.

In closing: our God is a working God who has blessed us with the opportunity to serve him as his instruments to love and serve our neighbor.

An encouragement when preparing to preach on this text, the Epistle assigned for the Last Sunday of the Church Year: Read aloud and meditate on all the assigned readings for the day, praying that the Holy Spirit will enlighten and move you with the truth of the Scriptures which you are reading and on which you are meditating. Take your time.

Psalm 46: the ever-present help-in-trouble God who is our refuge and strength is, indeed, the God who will be exalted among the nations and in the earth. In your meditation, be still and know that this is so, that God is God, your God as well as the God of all the earth.

Malachi 3:13–18: the day of the Lord is coming (include Mal 4:1–2 as something of an exegesis of 3:17–18), and God, the Lord Almighty, who can throw open the floodgates of heaven in blessing and also curse whole nations, indeed is the ruler of heaven.