

BaptistWay Bible Series for November 29: Being a thriving church in a tough situation

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A running shoe company says it like this: Just Do It. A preacher said it like this: Don't just talk the talk, but walk the walk. Coaches use such language to motivate the players on a team. Short, pithy statements have a way of staying with us. We remember them and hopefully follow their intended advice.

The Apostle Paul used such language when writing the church in Thessalonica: "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat'" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Indeed, his words sound judgmental at first glance, but they were written to help believers live authentically in the midst of a culture that was godless and pagan.

What the Bible says ...

No one can thrive in the midst of tough times without the power of prayer. 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5 emphasizes the importance of prayer and the need to rely upon God in every detail of one's life. Paul is careful to include himself as one who lived in a world where most did not know Christ: "And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith" (v. 2).

In addition to prayer, one must live responsibly in the midst of a culture that is Christless (vv. 6-12). Paul states, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is

idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us" (v. 6). Keep in mind, Paul is addressing believers who were lazy and unproductive. The basic meaning of the work translated "idle" is to be "unruly" or "undisciplined."

Verses 7-9 state that Paul was very careful to set a proper example by his own work ethic. He worked to provide for his own needs. Of course, Paul allowed others to help him when he needed assistance. His point is simple: He did not ignore his responsibilities and then ask for others to put food on his table.

In the midst of this discussion, Paul gives them the brief, right-to-the-point command: If you don't work, you don't eat. A possible background to this entire situation may well have been the attitude of believers concerning the return of Christ. Some may have misunderstood Paul's instruction concerning the second coming.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul states the coming of Christ will be sudden, like a thief in the night. As a result, some believers might have taken on the attitude of seeing no reason to work, to pay bills, to live responsibly, since Jesus might appear at any moment. Then when it came time to take care of basic issues of life, they begged others for help.

If this was the situation, then what influence did these lazy congregants have upon their neighbors? Seeing things in light of this possible background explains Paul's words: "Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat" (v. 12). Paul felt strongly about this issue. "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed" (v. 14).

Yet even in the midst of these strong, impassioned words, Paul's intent is not to destroy, but to bring an errant brother to the point where he will see

his mistake and change his behavior (v. 15).

Paul sums up his advice with the idea that believers should never tire of doing what is right (v. 13). No matter what the cost, no matter how many times one is rejected, followers of Jesus never give up on living responsible lives.

What the Bible means to me today ...

In our own day and age, our culture remains pagan and godless. Jesus commands us to be light in the midst of darkness and salt in the midst of a tasteless society.

If we are to reach those who need the love of Christ, then we must live responsibly. How else can we earn the right to speak or exert influence among those around us?

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I pray about how I come across to those I know who need Christ? Do I rely upon God, or do I approach everything depending on my own strength?
- Have I come across as lazy or undisciplined in any area of my life? Though you may work hard at your job, do you communicate through your actions and words that God owes you certain things? Some of us actually think we are “above the law” when it comes to some issues of life. We could not be more wrong.
- Have I given up on doing the things God wants me to do, whether big or small? It is easy to give up on people, especially when it seems you have time and again done the right thing with no response. If you live and act out of your own strength, then you have the right to say, “I give up.” But if you live and act to please God and you rely on him, is there ever a time to stop doing good?

Here's a short, pithy statement: "God never quit on us, so we can never quit on others."

I think I can remember that. What about you?