

Human Doings vs. Human Beings

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Mark 12:41-44

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Occasionally, I have conversations with other clergy members about the benefits and drawbacks of preaching thematically vs. preaching according to the three-year cycle of lectionary readings.

I think there are merits to both approaches. But one of the reasons one commonly hears in favour of lectionary-based preaching is that it saves the congregation from being held hostage to the favourite passages and pet issues of the preacher.

It forces you to engage with texts that you might prefer to avoid.

This morning we have both a passage from the lectionary (2 Thessalonians) and one that I chose (Mark). I'm trying to have the best of both worlds today!

I think it's safe to say that the passage from the lectionary is one that I would not have chosen—indeed, it is one that I might even prefer to avoid.

Paul is responsible for some of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture (1 Corinthians 13, Philippians 2...). He's also responsible for some of the most blunt and confrontational passages!

I'm going to guess that there were, broadly speaking, two reactions that you were having when you heard the passage from 2 Thessalonians that was just read.

Some of you were likely cheering Paul on. "Yeah, that's right, you tell 'em, Paul! No free rides! There are too many people in our world who are happy to do nothing and live off the labour of others.

"Our culture has become lazy and entitled. Particularly 'kids these days!' When I was their age, I knew how to work. I didn't think that the world owed me anything!

“Whether it’s in the church or the broader culture, too many people think they can just lounge around, not contribute, wag their tongues and stir up controversy.”

For some, this passage is a necessary rousing call to industry and taking responsibility for our own lives and for the communities of which we are a part.

Others were perhaps squirming a little bit. “Whoa, Paul, take it easy! What about those who aren’t able to work for their own bread? We don’t all have the same abilities, after all. Some people face obstacles that others don’t. Some people have baggage.

“Not everyone can just roll up their sleeves and get to work. What about those who have mental health challenges or anxiety or stress or workplace injuries? What about those who have tried to find work and can’t? What about the gig economy and unstable employment and the pressure this puts on people?

“And frankly, Paul, what about Jesus’ words about compassion and mercy for the vulnerable and the marginalized, caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the victim?”

For some, this passage seems a rather blunt instrument that is insensitive to the differences that exist in human communities and the challenges that some people face.

So, what do we do with Paul’s words to the church in Thessalonica?

Should we be cheerleaders for Paul’s call to cultivate the discipline of work and the virtue of responsibility? Should we offer him a mild reproach for his lack of compassion and understanding?

Well, the best place to start is always the original context.

In both of Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians, it is evident that this was a community who believed that the return of Christ was imminent. Paul devotes large chunks of both letters to addressing the “day of the Lord” and the “coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

It seems likely that some believers were so convinced that Jesus would be showing up at any moment, that they had kind of checked out of their everyday lives.

Why bother working? It'll all be over soon.

Versions of this kind of thinking have existed throughout church history. These are the proverbial folks who are too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.

Such Christians are so focused on the end of the world and the coming judgment that they ignore biblical calls to work for justice, and truth, mercy and compassion in the world.

As one commentator puts it,

These believers ignore the weak and the lowly, they disdain the challenge to reflect the life of Jesus in their lives and prefer instead to allow wickedness and malevolence to increase in their misguided and deviant idea that this will all hasten the coming of Christ.¹

So, it is possible that these are among the people that Paul is telling to get to work.

It's also possible that there were some who were initially attracted to the church because of the community, care, kindness, and generosity they experienced there, which was unlike anything else they had ever seen!

But once they became a part of this radically generous church, they began to take advantage of it and become a drain on the community.

Some commentators even suggest that the lazy idlers might have been those who were wealthy and thought that they have no need to work. After all, why would they want to dirty their hands, when others will do it for them?

This passage could be a reminder to the wealthy that they need to humble themselves, that the body of Christ is a place where hierarchies are abolished, where true greatness is demonstrated in willingness to serve.

Whichever category to which the idlers belonged, it's worth remembering that *Paul knew them*.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4278

He's not writing to some abstract category of human beings but to specific people in a specific community at a specific time and place.

He's not offering sweeping sociological commentary or engaging in political analysis or diagnosing trends in the labour market. He's talking to brothers and sisters in what would have been a fairly small community.

Paul is not saying anything about those who are *unable* to work for their own bread and to contribute to the community; he's saying something about those who are *unwilling* to do so.

He's talking to those who have departed from his own personal example and the tradition of the early church.

And what is this tradition? It's a tradition of righteousness, justice, truth, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. Paul makes this clear in his first letter to the same church where he has this to say:

Encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but **always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else** (1 Thess. 5:14-15).

We see that it's pretty difficult to read Paul as advocating for the heroic individual to "Stand up and take care of yourself!" He is quite clearly concerned about those who are struggling in life.

Be patient, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, strive to do what is good for others.

Paul has a deep concern for those on the wrong end of the score. But he also has a concern for those who are not doing what they can to help.

He's trying to get the idlers to see that the community they belong to and the tradition that they have inherited is one where the individual strives to do what is good for the community.

It is in this broad context, I think, that we should hear Paul's words: "Get to work!"

I want to end my sermon with a reflection on something that's not directly connected to the text, but which reading it this week prompted in me.

I want to talk about the distinction that the title of my sermon points to: Human doing vs. human being.

It seems to me that many of us spend most of our lives trying to figure out how our doing fits with our being.

We are trained, in countless ways and from very early in our lives, to think of ourselves as doers. We see this even in how we use the terminology.

We routinely ask kids the question, “What do you want to *be* when you grow up?” By which we mean, of course, “What do you want to *do* when you grow up?”

We’re not really asking what kinds of people they aspire to be, what virtues they want to be known for, what moral priorities they want to characterize their lives; we’re asking about what job they want to do.

Yes, it would be great if they aspired to something like virtue or being properly formed as human beings. But we’re mostly interested in how they will go out into the world and make money.

We’re not much better as adults. What’s the first question you get asked in any new social situation? “So, what do you do?” Or, “what *did* you do?”

I suppose we’re at least more honest about things than with the question we ask kids—we don’t even bother with the word “be” anymore.

We have been well trained by this point. We know that the assumption is that we are human doings not human beings.

And over time, a pernicious lie becomes entrenched in our souls: You are what you do.

You are defined by what you’re able to accomplish or have already accomplished. If you’re not contributing something to the world and to the community, you have no worth, to other people or to God.

To people who are trained to think “I am what I do,” Paul’s charge to “get to work” can feel like one more heavy burden on top of all the other burdens. *I’m not valuable unless I’m working. I’m not measuring up.*

To these people, I want to say. You are *not* what you do. You are loved by God irrespective of what you will ever contribute. Your value as a human being is not tied to your productivity or resourcefulness.

You are a human being not a human doing.

Other people perhaps occupy the opposite end of the spectrum. They know that they are loved and that their value is not tied up in their productivity. They are settled in the conviction that they don’t have to earn God’s love.

Perhaps too settled. Their focus has grown too narrow. They have grown complacent and preoccupied with themselves. They have forgotten or never learned that human beings were created to do more than just bask in the love and grace and acceptance of God.

They have forgotten that the love, acceptance, and forgiveness of God is an invitation, not a possession.

Here, the lie is that we have no responsibility to the broader community, that the spiritual life is mostly inward and personal and about “me and Jesus.” *And who are you to judge me anyway?!*

To these people, I want to say that human doing is bound up with human being.

You are not *defined* by your doing. This isn’t where your legitimacy and value ultimately come from.

But each one of us is created for the work of righteousness, gratitude, trust, and hope. As Paul tells the Ephesians:

[W]e are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:10).

We often struggle to hold both of these truths—you’re not defined by your doing, but you have been created for good works—at the same time. It’s not easy to get it right and we go back and forth from pole to pole.

But we are called to live into both aspects of this vital truth about who we are as human beings.

Christianity pays us the compliment of asking something of us, demanding that we live up to and *into* the dignity of being human.

We are not defined by what we do. Our value is not determined by how much we are able to contribute in the world. We are loved as we are. This is true and gloriously so.

But, as Paul reminded the Thessalonians, this does not mean that we are free to do *nothing*. Everyone can contribute something. Everyone is called to contribute something.

This is the reminder offered to us by the short passage from Mark. The story operates on multiple levels, as so many stories in the gospels do.

But whatever else is going on in the story, it's also plain that Jesus is praising the woman for contributing what she is able—indeed, for giving *sacrificially*, instead of just skimming a bit off the excess, as the rich people were doing.

Whether it's money or time or care or labour or creativity or kindness or prayer, everyone can contribute something to the world and to the church. No matter our age or ability or station in life, everyone has something to offer.

And I hope you hear this not as an admonition but an invitation. I think something in us begins to die when we settle for a life of idleness and passivity.

I really do worry about a cultural context where we seem to be dulling our pain with entertainment and addictions of all kinds rather than meaningful engagement in the world.

Work is not a curse or a result of the fall. We were created to tend the garden before the serpent ever showed up on the scene to introduce the lie, "You can be like God..."

If we treat work like a necessary evil and something to be avoided rather than one of God's gifts to us, to keep us engaged, active, alert, and faithful in the world, then we settle for less than we were created to be in the world.

As Christians, we're not called to just sit back and let someone else take care of things until we die, and we're whisked off to paradise or until Jesus comes again.

We are human beings, not human doings. But part of what it means to *be* fully human to the glory of God is to *do* what we were created to do.

My prayer is that we will never settle for either of the two lies that are constantly held before us—that we are what we do or that our doing has no connection to our being.

My prayer is that each one of us would be fully human beings, living out our vocation with humility, faithfulness and hope, for the benefit of all and for the world that God has made.

May we never grow weary of *doing* what is right because of who God has made us to *be*.

Amen.

