

Being a member of the church

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[0:00] Friends, good morning.

If you're here, if you're a part of our church right now, you are here and part of this community since we're meeting in a living room because we are on the verge of a relaunch. We're in the final stages of renovating our permanent church home in the heart of the city, and this is going to bring a lot of change to our community. It's going to create an enormous amount of opportunity. For the first time ever in the life of our church, we will have a city center permanent location that will be yours. It will be a place that you can come, whether you live in Bethesda or Chevrolet or Capitol Hill or Columbia Heights or Arlington or Brooklyn or wherever you're coming from, you will now have a place where you can come to pray. You will have a place where you can come to rest and be with the Lord. You'll have a place where you can come to spend time with and connect with other people in this community. And we're also going to have what will be a hub for ministry throughout the DMV area. It will greatly expand the opportunities that we have to love and serve the people of this city. And so we're at this amazing moment that not many people get to experience.

And so it's incredible, and there's a lot to be excited about just around the corner in the next couple of months that will be coming to full fruition. And yet at the same time, it's been a hard year.

It's been a hard year for many people in our community, for many people in our society. It's been a hard year in the life of our country, but also in our church. There's been a lot of change.

There's been a lot of upheaval. And I think a lot of people are simply weary. I am weary. And I know many of you are too for lots of different reasons. And so the question that we have before us is how do we lean into what God is doing right now in our midst?

[2:29] Right? How do we lean into that? When we might be most tempted to pull back, to say, I'm just too tired. I just don't have it in me. I'm just trying to make life work. I'm just trying to kind of, you know, get through the day or get through the week. How do we lean in when there can be a strong and maybe very understandable temptation to pull back? How do we go about building the kind of church that we feel called to build, right? That being the kind of community that we hear about in our gospel reading, right? A community of witnesses who are on mission, who recognize that no matter how much we might face, no matter how many challenges might come, we are fully given over to this calling that we have from the Lord Jesus Christ. How do we become that kind of community and build the kind of church that we want to be a part of, right, when many of us feel so weary? And as it turns out, the lectionary reading this week, the New Testament reading from 2 Thessalonians 3, very practically gets at this question. It very practically speaks to people who I think feel a lot like us, people who are weary and tired and yet who are desiring to live into this great calling that we have in response to the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ is risen and He is coming again, right? And so Paul is writing to these people and he's essentially saying this. I think one of the kind of core verses here is he says, as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.

In other words, don't give up. Continue pursuing God's purposes in your life and in your community for your good and for His glory. But the question is, how do we do that? And that's what we're going to look at this morning. I'm going to suggest three ways from this passage to not grow weary of doing good, even when we may be tempted to give up. So let's pray and then we will open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you that it is ever available to us, not

only as words on a page, but as a way to hear your voice. Your voice is that which we need most. Lord, and as we hear your voice, may you align our hearts with your heart and may you bring us face to face with the living word, Jesus Christ. And it's in His name that we pray. Amen.

So as we contemplate this question of how do we respond to what God is doing, how do we not grow weary of doing good? The first thing I would say from this passage is simply this, that we should seek to be intentional in how we live, to be intentional. In both of his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul warns against the danger of idleness. And the example that he is using here is the example of food and people who are either working for the food they eat or not working. This is in a community where they would come together, they would share a common meal. But he's warning about something more broad when he talks about idleness. This is a much broader term.

[5:38] And by the way, he's not the only one who warns against the danger of idleness. Christians have warned one another about the danger of idleness throughout the history of the church. St. Francis famously called idleness the enemy of the soul. But what exactly is idleness?

And at first glance, it might be tempting to think Paul is simply talking about people who are lazy. Don't, you know, if people are being lazy, they shouldn't eat. But that's not exactly what he's talking about. On closer examination, it seems the issue is not so much inactivity. It's the wrong kind of activity. These people, I think, that Paul has in mind are very active people.

But they're spending their time and energy doing things not that benefit and meet the needs of the broader community. They're spending their time and energy on things that are ultimately unproductive and even disruptive. So the thing we need to understand about idleness is, idleness is not necessarily laziness. Idleness is more understood, I think it's better understood, as a lack of intentionality. It's living a kind of rudderless life where you are allowing yourself to be carried along by the wind and the current of the circumstances that you're in. But you're not aiming at anything. Right? There's no rowing against the current. There's no direction in mind. So you can be extremely busy as an idle person, but it's not purposeful. Right? You're spending a lot of sideways energy on things that ultimately don't matter. So idleness is like motion without mission.

It's simply motion. A lot of times idleness in our lives looks like a bunch of pseudo work. Now what do I mean by pseudo work? It's activities that consume energy and consume time but produce no fruit.

[7:41] Things that multiply and expand our anxieties. Things that maybe prevent us or keep us from the responsibilities God has actually entrusted to us. So doom scrolling on our phones.

Right? How much time do we spend doom scrolling? Or how much time do we spend, you know, just scrolling on Instagram or TikTok or Zillow or whatever your favorite flavor might be? That's pseudo work.

How much time and energy do we spend overthinking and dwelling on situations that we can't ultimately control? You know, or putting off decisions because we're just analyzing and researching and analyzing and researching and we're afraid to pull the trigger. That's a kind of pseudo work. It takes an enormous amount of time and energy. Living lives where we are vastly over committed because we tend to over commit out of guilt or obligation. We have a really hard time saying no. We don't ever want to feel like we're letting anybody down. And so we just say yes to everything. And then there's this kind of low-grade resentment that's always simmering under the surface because of all the things that we've said yes to. Right? These are forms of activity. They're forms of busyness but without any direction or purpose behind them. And I think this is why many of us feel weary in our lives. I think that causes a constant weariness, the white noise that we live in. You know, research on burnout has found pretty conclusively that burnout is not actually the direct result of effort. It's not really about the hours worked. Burnout is actually the product of stagnation. That's what causes a sense of burnout. It's, you know, what we find is that when you can actually see progress in your life that you're making toward goals, people will work any number of hours. They'll work as hard as it takes and they'll do it with a ton of energy and motivation. Burnout happens when there is no measurable progress despite our effort. When you feel like no matter how much I'm doing, the ball is not moving forward. That's what causes burnout. So think about your life. If you're not aiming at anything, if you're not aiming at anything beyond just getting through the day, there's going to be no way to measure progress.

You're just going to be spending time and energy, but with no sense of forward motion. And that's going to create a sense of exhaustion. It's going to wear us down. So I would suggest that the first way that we should be thinking about overcoming that sense of weariness that many of us feel, it starts with intentionality. You know, first to borrow a phrase from Dallas Willard, we need to ruthlessly eliminate the pseudo work from our lives. We need to ruthlessly eliminate it. And then we need to decide what are we aiming our lives at? What are we living for? Who are we living for? What matters most?

And I find it really helpful to just sit down and make a short list of the callings in our lives, just to write it down. Just sit down and say, what are the things I'm called to? What are the roles that are most important in my life? I'm a follower of Jesus. I'm a spouse. I am a parent. I'm a friend.

[11:12] I have a job. I'm an employee, right? These are the roles that I know that Jesus has called me to. And just to write those things down, and then to begin with a kind of purposeful beginning to our day to seek a kind of clarity based on those callings by beginning the day by simply praying.

You can do this as you're brushing your teeth, you know, as you're taking a shower in the morning, just praying, Lord, what is mine to do today? What are my responsibilities today? And it doesn't have to be everything I'm called to do in my whole life, but just starting with 10 or 15 minutes of praying and asking God, as I think about these callings in my life, what are the two or three things that I should really focus on? Where are the areas? Where are the relationships, the people, the goals that I should really be investing in today? Two or three things. And seek clarity on that.

And then the day should be about investing in those two or three ways. And when we've done that, we call it a success, right? And we rest. So intentionality is about understanding what our lives are aimed at and living in line with them and doing what we can to cut out the rest, right?

This is very simple. It's very practical. But I think a lot of this sits behind the weariness that many of us feel. So that's the first thing. This is going to be an interesting dance with this thing here. It keeps dropping down on me. The next thing I would say, just looking at this passage, is that we should commit ourselves to being contributors where the Lord has us, to making a contribution.

You're like, well, that sounds like the opposite. If I'm weary and you're telling me to do more, it's not exactly the way it works. Paul is deeply concerned over the fact that there are apparently some people in the community who are benefiting from the community and they're getting their needs met, but they're not actively serving or contributing in any way to meet the needs of the community. And this seems to be a huge concern for Paul. And it's worth asking, why is this such a big deal for Paul? It seems like he could just maybe have a sentence or two about it, but the language here is very strongly worded. And what we need to realize is that this is related to how Paul understands the nature of the church. In many of his other letters, we see Paul consistently comparing the church to a human body. And that's extremely important. It's not just a metaphor that Paul uses.

[13:50] It's a spiritual reality that Paul is trying to impress upon us as God's people. What it means is this, is that when you become a Christian, that's not just a private transaction that happens between you and the Lord, where you get right with God and then you go on with your life.

When you become a Christian, you are incorporated, meaning you are taken into and made part of a body. You're incorporated into the body of Christ. So when you became a Christian, whatever point in life, for those of us who are Christians, whenever that happened, you ceased at that moment to be an autonomous, isolated individual. And there was an ontological change. Your nature changed.

And you became part of a living spiritual organism. From that moment on, your nature changed. And here's how Paul describes the way that organism works in Ephesians 4. Notice, everybody has work to do. So he says in Ephesians 4, the work of church leaders, people like pastors, is to equip saints. It's to equip God's people. The work of God's people is to do the work of all of the other various ministries that happen in the life of the church. And then he says that as everybody is doing their work, the body grows. And it grows into maturity. It grows more and more and more into the likeness of Christ when everybody is doing the work that they've been given to do. And then he says at the end of the passage, the whole body grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work.

So the point is that the body grows if and when every part of the body is doing the work that it is given to do. And, you know, if you think about your body, that's exactly how human bodies work. In order for your body to grow and to be healthy and to develop normally, every single cell has to contribute to the growth and health of the entire system. And that is generally the case. The cells in your body, wherever they might be located, whatever organ they might be a part of, whatever kind of cell they might be, the thing they all have in common is they are all oriented towards serving the common good of the whole body. And when all your cells are doing that, you're healthy. There's one kind of cell that we sometimes find that doesn't do that. We sometimes find it in the human body. It's a healthy cell. It's a growing cell. It's a thriving cell. In every way, it looks like all the other cells in your body. Even white blood cells can't tell the difference between these cells and any other cell in your body. There's only one difference between these cells and all the other cells, is that these cells, instead of seeking the common good, they prioritize their own good and health and they disregard the needs of the body.

[16:49] And of course, the name for these kinds of cells is cancer. That's what cancer does. And so, when we look at Paul's language, we have to recognize that when he comes into the church in Thessaloniki, he recognizes as he's among these people that there are a significant number of people who are not only focused on getting their own needs met, but they're not willing to work and contribute to the community in any way.

And for Paul, this isn't just an issue of logistics. This is cause for alarm. I mean, in a way, you might say that Paul looks at this and says, oh, this is not good. This is not a healthy church. This church has cancer. And so, he strongly commands these people, essentially saying, do everything you can to rectify that situation as quickly as possible because the growth and the health of the church actually hinges on this issue being resolved. Now, what does this have to do with us and the ability to not grow weary in doing good? Well, when you have a significant number of people who are consuming in a community without contributing, a couple of things happen. For the people who are serving, there is a much greater demand placed on them, on their time and on their energy because there's not enough people to share the load.

And so, it's draining on them. But here's the real paradox. And unless you've experienced this, it might be kind of counterintuitive. But for the people in any community who aren't contributing, who aren't serving, the people who are simply sort of there to receive, that can actually be more draining. And I know that sounds like a paradox. But here's the way it works. When you're part of a group, whether it's a family or, you know, workplace environment or a friend group or a church, when you're actively contributing, that's actually energizing because you feel like you are connected to and part of the mission. You're operating like a stakeholder. And so, when anything good happens, you share in the joy of that because you feel like you helped contribute to make that thing happen.

And so, it's incredibly energizing. When you're actively contributing in a community, you feel energized because you bond with the other people that you're serving alongside. That's how a lot of friendships form in communities like the church. And so, contributing, even though you're spending time and energy that you might not otherwise be spending, you're getting so much more back, right, out of that investment. And by contrast, people who come to church simply to consume, over time, tend to remain and feel disconnected, uninvested. There can be a tendency, even despite our good intentions, to view the church more as a product than as a shared project.

So, you spend your time focusing on whether your needs are getting met, whether or not you like this or that, whether your preferences are being honored. But all the while, you're missing out on the satisfaction that comes with actually meeting the needs of others in the community.

[20:10] When things happen, you're from the outside looking in. You're not sharing in the celebration. You're sort of sitting on the sidelines. And that can be draining over time.

So, if you're feeling weary right now, there might be a strong temptation to pull back, to say, you know, in this season, I just can't do X, Y, or Z. But in reality, I would argue that this is probably the best possible time for you to intentionally lean in to the opportunities and openings that God has in your life. You would be amazed if we had the time. You would be amazed if I just took the time to regale you with a comprehensive list of all of the men and women who serve in all of their various ways to simply make this possible, right? There are people who came early this morning to set up

and people who will stay late in order to clean up. There are people who greeted us at the door. There are people right now loving and teaching our kids. There are people who bake our communion bread and people who make music and people who read scripture and people who pray for others, not just here on Sundays, but all throughout the week. There are people who are right now ensuring that our space is safe and that it's accessible. There are people who are right now working to write policies to make sure that we are adopting all of the best practices that we can to have a healthy and thriving church. There are people who are writing and submitting grant proposals and getting some of them. That's how they're serving the church, by writing grant proposals. There are people who are actively supporting missionaries all around the world and making sure not only that they have enough funding, but that they are loved and cared and prayed for. There are people who are hosting small groups, who are hosting and leading our youth. There are people who are showing up from time to time to mow the lawn and trim the hedges in our church building. There are, and many of you are a part of these groups. All of that is happening, and that is just the smallest little sliver of the activity that happens every week to make Church of the Advent possible. And, you know, in the months that are coming, the months ahead, there's going to be even more ways to serve. There's a newly formed and growing mercy team. There are going to be people, you know, my vision and hope for our church is that when you come in the door, you're not only welcomed and greeted, but that somebody is actually serving you coffee, right, because we are committed to hospitality. There's going to be opportunities to help keep our space clean. There's going to be opportunities to set up rooms for various events throughout the week. There's going to be opportunities to help with fellowship meals that we'll be able to have. There's going to be opportunities to be a part of and help us launch Alpha so that we can do more in the way of evangelism in our city. I would love to see us start and host addiction recovery meetings in our space. We're going to have a need for that, and some people are particularly called to that, right? Now, I don't want you to hear this as a to-do list. I want you to hear this as an opportunity to lean in, to lean into what God is doing, you know, because ultimately we're called to do more than simply consume. We're called to actually work together to build the kind of church that we would want to be a part of, right, a kind of church that's on mission together. There is a kind of energy and vitality, a kind of motivation that comes from that that you're not going to find anywhere else. This is the kind of church that grows into maturity. It's a church where every part does its work. So the first two things that we've looked at, be intentional and then be a contributor.

The last thing in this passage I think very interesting and every bit as important, be a peacemaker. Be a peacemaker. It's very interesting. In verse 11, Paul says that some of the people in this church are not just idle, they are disruptive because they're not busy doing good work that benefits the community. Instead, he says in a kind of play on words, they are busy bodies.

And here's an example of how Scripture can be extremely insightful about the human condition. You know, there are times, you know, as the phrase goes, where you're reading the Bible and at some point you begin to realize that the Bible is actually reading you, right? And the Bible is the only book in the world that can do it that way, where you feel like you're not only reading your diary, but you're reading somebody who knows you better than you know yourself. Some people avoid work in their lives.

Tell me if this resonates at all. You don't have to tell me, just think it. That resonates. Some people avoid the work in their life, meaning some people avoid the things that they're responsible for, right? So here's the things that God has given me to do, and I don't want to deal with those things for whatever reason. And you avoid the work that you've been given to do by going and focusing on other people's stuff because it's appealing, and it's a way of escaping your own stuff, right?

[25:33] So people like this may seem busy. They may seem overwhelmed. They may seem exhausted. But if you look closely at their lives, none of that energy is actually being spent on their stuff.

They're spending all their time and energy worrying about and obsessing over and focusing on other people's stuff, right? So what do I mean by this? Well, there are some people who seem to just gravitate toward crisis, you know? And maybe they're the people who tend to sort of gravitate whenever there's a crisis, and they will kind of insert themselves in a kind of unsolicited way.

Or some of us spend a lot of time and energy obsessing over other people's choices. You know, why did they choose this? Or how can I get them to do this? Or how can I get them to change on this thing, right? And we just obsess over other people's choices.

Some of us spend a lot of time and energy trying to manage other people's emotions. We worry way more about other people's emotional state maybe even than they do, right? We're not okay when other people are not okay. Or we're not okay when other people are not okay with us. And we're spending all of our time and energy thinking about that. Some people really tend to and are prone to gossip, you know? Meaning talking about and sharing things that are really not their concern. Maybe misinformed or under-informed things that we don't really have any right to be talking about, but we're talking about them because they're interesting and salacious. And we like to be the person who is in the know. But we're sort of, you know, sharing about and spending time on things that don't really concern us. And then there's triangulation, which we're sort of pulling in a more modern-day term.

But it's a good way of getting at, I think, some of what Paul means when he talks about busybodies. Triangulation is essentially when there is a conflict or an issue between two people. Instead of those two people working it out directly, they pull in a third person or a fourth or a fifth, right? So you'll have person A, and person A says or does something, and it really doesn't sit right with person B. Person B is offended. Person B just does not want to, does not have the time or energy to go talk to person A, and what's going to happen, and what if they get mad at me, and, you know? And so, you know, I need some help and advice. And so they go to person C.

[28:00] Let me tell you what person A said or did. I was so offended. I was so hurt. Person C says, oh, so now person C is in this weird situation where person C knows something about person A. Person A has no idea there's a problem.

And then person B and C, and they're like, well, let's pray about this. We're going to pray about it. And then person C now feels responsible for a situation that they never should have been involved in, and they don't know what to do. Well, they need some advice and say, then person C goes to person D and E and F. Hey, can I get some advice, and can we pray about this? And then they talk about that. And before long, you have person A who's coming in thinking everything's fine, and you've got persons B through Q who know all about person A's business, right? And now the situation is way bigger and messier because now all those other people, you know, people M and Q and X, they all have pretty strong opinions about person A, right? And it's a whole thing, right? Now, I know this is a drawn out example. It's all purely hypothetical, right? But we need to take this kind of thing extremely seriously, right? And here again, when you first read this passage, and you look at the issue Paul's addressing, and then you look at the strength of his language, you know, we need to ignore these people so that they feel ashamed, right? And he makes a reference to kind of a church disciplinary situation. When you first read it, you're like, wow, Paul's really overreacting. But then you realize, when you see the kind of harm that these kinds of behaviors do in a church community, when you see that firsthand, Paul's reaction makes sense. Over the years, the hardest situations that we have faced as a church, without exception, started out as very manageable situations between maybe two, three, four people that could have and should have been resolved. But what happened, right? You have gossip, you have slander, you have triangulation, you have more and more and more people getting pulled into what we affectionately refer to as the swirl. And when that happens, the situation quickly spirals out of control. And a situation that should have been able to be resolved becomes uncontrollable, unmanageable, relationships irreparably break down, and people leave. And I think that many of us have seen this happen. If not in the church, the same thing happens in friend groups. It happens in neighborhoods and small towns. It happens in workplaces. It happens in families. Some of us are going to go to Thanksgiving this year, and there are going to be certain people who aren't sitting there, who should be sitting there. And when you feel that in the family, around the dinner table, when you feel that in a church, it's heartbreak. It's grievous. And so you look at this letter from Paul, and you realize, oh yeah, Paul's actually seen this. He knows how dangerous it is. That's why he's being so strong with his words. Now, I think some of us are weary from situations like this. And we have seen firsthand how they can drain energy and focus away from gospel ministry. Talk about the all-time best definition of sideways energy, of unproductive, unproductive work, right? Because these things can spread like wildfire.

[31:30] And so Paul urges the church to take this kind of thing very seriously. So he says to the people who are being busybodies, we command and urge you in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down. That's what he

says. Settle down. And then he says, work for your own food, which is a way of saying, focus on your stuff that God has given you to do that you're responsible for, and put some boundaries in place.

Don't over-focus on other people's stuff. This is not to say that we shouldn't help each other, support each other, encourage each other, pray for each other. But motivation is everything. Are you being invited into that? Is it your place to be there? Is this something that you're responsible for? Is it your business? Are you using this as a way to avoid your own stuff, right? These are the questions we should be asking. And then Paul says to the rest of the church, when you see other people doing this, avoid it at all costs. Don't allow yourself to get pulled into the swirl, right? So if somebody comes to you and says, I need your advice, I'm having this conflict with this other person, I just want to tell you about it, and I can't, can you believe what they said or did, right? It can be very tempting to think that the Christian response is to dive in and help. But I would suggest, based on this, that the Christian response is to say, you know, that it sounds like it's been really hard for you. This is really not my business.

And I want to strongly encourage you to go to that person and to work this out directly with them. That's what Jesus commands us to do, right? That's what the apostles command us to do. Go and bring this to them and try to work it out. And that person says, I can't imagine doing that. And you say, okay, well, we're going to pray together, but I'm going to pray for this goal in your life. I'm going to pray that at some point you get the courage to go to this person and to be honest and work this out with them. The gospel has given us everything we need to make that possible. We just need to do it.

Maybe, maybe we could role play some scenarios, right? And you can practice what you're going to say, but your goal as that friend is to see that conversation happen, right? If you're in a group of people and someone starts gossiping about a situation, encourage them to change the subject.

[33:44] Hey, I really don't think we should be talking about this, right? In other words, this is again, very practical stuff, right? We're all called to be peacemakers. A peaceful community is only possible if everybody in the community is committed to peace and committed to making peace and committed to doing what we can to preserve and protect peace because God desires his community to be a community of peace. And peace, friends, doesn't just mean an absence of conflict, like a ceasefire. Peace means wholeness. Peace means flourishing. Peace means everything being put right in our relationships, not only with God, but within the church and to the extent possible with the surrounding world. It means being a part of the kind of church that we would want to be a part of.

And as the final verse reminds us, this kind of peace is not something that we can attain in our own strength. It's only possible, and it only comes by knowing the Lord of peace, who is Jesus Christ. Paul is alluding to the fact that through his death and resurrection, Jesus makes it possible for us to find a lasting, eternal peace with God and with one another. So the way, the best way for us to be peacemakers is to make him the center of our life and to follow Paul's example, to actively pray for this, to pray to the Lord of peace that he would give us the kind of peace that only he can give.

So to bring this all together right now, pivotal opportunity. We have an opportunity to relaunch and build a community of peace, to be a church in the heart of DC that is committed to seeking the good of the city for the glory of God. And so the invitation for us this morning is very practical, right? It's very practical. The call is this, to simply be intentional in how we spend our time and energy, to find ways to contribute so that we're all growing together, and then simply to be peacemakers, to pray for peace, to promote peace whenever we have opportunity to do so, so that our hearts and lives reflect the Lord of peace. And now to close with Paul's blessing, may the Lord of peace himself give us peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

Lord, we pray that this would be true. We pray that this would be real. We pray that this would be, that in however we need to hear and receive your word this morning, that you would.

[36:25] And we pray ultimately that this would be a very practical way for us to take steps toward being the kind of community, the kind of communal witness that we're called to be. Lord, just as the gospel said that one day we may be called before the authorities and persecuted, Lord, and we want to be ready for that day, but we know that our witness

begins here simply in how we treat one another and how we do life together. And we pray that this would all be true and reflect your heart according to the power of your spirit. In Jesus's name, amen.