

Never Tire of Doing Good

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[0 : 0 0] I have to say that with the last few years and COVID, it's been a bit of a disappointment not to have the RMIT team here. But we've had a long history of the RMIT mission team coming, all the way back to when I started, even before that, I think, with Heather, I think ever since Heather and Andrew started here.

And so it's always a great joy to have you guys with us from Wednesday to Sunday, this being the last sermon or last service that you're at.

And I have to say that one thing always happens with the team, and that is it's a long day. Sunday is a long day, and I tend to be the one to give the last sermon on the last service.

And so it's not uncommon for the team to, you know, do fall asleep kind of thing at my sermon. I never take it personally.

But I think the reading from Proverbs is a bit apt, a little folding of hands and all that. So I would suggest not to fold your hands, but we are Church of Grace.

[1 : 1 4] So notwithstanding the title tonight, Never Tire of Doing Good, it's okay. I wouldn't take it personally if you're too tired. Now, it's always a perennial challenge, isn't it, to find the right balance to life, work-life balance.

We hear that all the time. But some of you young people, you know, having the right amount of exercise or sleep, too much is bad, and so is too little.

Now, I think for some of you, it might be sort of the sleep-X-box balance, isn't it? How much X-box is good or not good?

Or perhaps exams are around the corner, and, you know, you panic. The temptation is to cram and go without food or sleep.

Just caffeine, right? Who thinks that's a good idea? Yeah, I think there's still some unrepentant members, you know.

[2 : 1 9] And I guess this challenge is the same with gospel work as well. You probably hear sometimes pastors like me say that it's the most important thing in life. Gospel work is God's work, and we should do nothing else.

Now, that's not what I'm saying, but I'm saying you may hear pastors say things like that. And even if we don't use the exact words, you may get the impression that we don't need to do anything else.

No studies, no need to feed our family, no need for a day job, just do gospel work. But, of course, that's not right, is it?

And as we look at today's passage, it is important to strike that balance, the right balance, in order to apply this correctly. Now, before we get into the passage, let me just say up front that I think the key verse for tonight is verse 13.

Paul says to the Thessalonians on the slide, And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good. It's the key verse because throughout the chapter, Paul explains just what this doing good entails.

[3 : 31] Now, it may seem quite simple on the surface, but I want to take some time to dig deeper. What exactly does poor mean by good?

Now, at one level, good is literally anything that's good. So, it's good to do the dishes. It's good to clean the toilet. And mom's looking at Christy right now, yep.

It's good to give an elderly lady a seat on the train. So, make sure. Never tire of doing these things, right? It's good. Simple.

But if you look a little more at the content of Paul's letter, I think he has something more specific in mind. So, for instance, in chapter 1, verse 11, Paul prays that God will bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith.

So, the good he's praying for are deeds prompted by faith. And this is consistent with the prayer at the very start of the letter, verse 3.

[4 : 37] He gives thanks for their growing faith, which results in their increasing love for one another. So, again, increasing love, good, resulting from increasing faith.

And this in the context of persecution and trials. By contrast, Paul warns that when Jesus comes, verse 9, those who don't obey the gospel will be destroyed.

These are people who fail to do good by not believing the gospel and then living it out in obedience. And so, if you remember chapter 2 and verse 16, those of you who were here last week, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to stand firm in the truth of God's word, after which he then prays that God will, on the slide, encourage and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

So, the good that Paul specifically has in mind is the good that arises from believing in the gospel. It's about living out the truth of God's word. And particularly in an age of lawlessness.

And so, while Paul doesn't exclude the good of cleaning toilets or caring for the poor or looking after the environment, what Paul has in mind in doing what's good is the good that arises from our faith in Jesus, in obedience to the word.

[5 : 59] And that's why, as we now look at chapter 3, Paul begins with a prayer request for these very things for himself and then for others. The good that Paul wishes to do is to preach the gospel and then afterwards to have those who believe obey it.

So, verse 1 we read, As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it is with you.

And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. This good of spreading the message of the Lord is for Paul of first importance and priority.

He's not suggesting that's the only good that can be done. But without people first believing the truth and then obeying the gospel, all the so-called good that they do comes to nothing on the day of the Lord.

That's just a logical conclusion, isn't it? Of believing that the day of judgment is coming. So, there's urgency in preaching the gospel. It doesn't mean we don't care for people by providing food and shelter, if that's what they need.

[7 : 13] But if you ask yourself, what's the greatest good we can do? It's really to reveal to them about the truth of Jesus, isn't it? And how to be saved in Him.

So, notice therefore that Paul defines evil people not as people who rob banks or people who exploit their employees, although these are evil things to do, but he defines it as people without faith.

Not everyone has faith. It's those who oppose the gospel, stymie the spread of the Lord's message. Either they are preaching a false gospel or they're silencing Paul.

But all of them, what they do, is stop the message of the Lord being honored. And Paul thinks that's evil. Now, these sorts of people, Paul realizes, are everywhere.

They're there where Paul is preaching, but they're also there in Thessalonica. And so, Paul turns his prayer next for the Thessalonians, that they will be strengthened and protected from the evil one so that they can continue to do good.

[8 : 19] So, verse 3, but the Lord is faithful and He will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command.

May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance. To continue to do the things we command, that's just another way, isn't it, of saying, never tire of doing good.

But the good that Paul has in mind here are the things that he's taught them from the Word. It's the same encouragement he's already given them to persevere in the faith, to obey the Gospel, all in the light of Christ's coming.

Why is he saying doing that? Well, he says, because God loves them, God's love, and because they love God. And because Christ persevered in His suffering for us, and we in turn are called to persevere in our faith in Him.

And that's what I think direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance means. Now, Paul knows, though, that there are things which threaten this and stops a believer from continuing to do good.

[9 : 31] What are they? Well, we keep going. First, in verse 6, Paul raises the threat of idleness. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you receive from us.

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were to do this to you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.

We did this not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule.

The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat. We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy. They are busy bodies. Such people would command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and to earn the food they eat.

Now, there is quite a bit to unpack here, but first, notice how we have moved from unbelievers, evil people, to idle believers in the church. Now, these people are not just idle, but they are disruptive.

[10 : 50] Paul, in verse 11, calls them busy bodies. They are not using their time wisely to work, to do good, but wasting it on stirring up trouble. Now, the cause of this is probably unclear.

Paul doesn't say. It could be that they think the day of the Lord is coming, so, you know, why bother to work? Or they are so caught up with the Lord's coming that they are speculating about it, prepping even, like the doomsday preppers of our day.

I've got a slide of a documentary, I think. So many of them around, can you believe it? They can actually produce a series on them. But anyway, that's a digression.

It could be that they're just, the fact that, you know, Paul, remember, in chapter 1, boasting about the love of the church. Well, it could be that some of these idle believers were taking advantage of the love of the others in church, the generosity of other members.

I think at the end of the day, the real reason probably doesn't matter so much as the corrective, which Paul says, is that they are to work. After all, God himself worked six days and rested on the Sabbath.

[12 : 04] And in our Proverbs reading today, his creation mandate extends even to the ants, isn't it? Who don't have a commander to tell them what to do. They just work. And so, the idea here is that all of God's creatures are made to work and to be productive.

Now, this problem, I think, was so acute that Paul even had to make a rule for them to say, if you're unwilling to work, then you don't get to eat. Now, imagine tonight as we're having chicken and chips, that before you get to, you know, get to the counter, the servers, before they give you their food, they ask you the question, did you work this week?

No? No good reason? Okay, sorry. No chicken and chips for you tonight. Now, we're not going to ask that of you tonight, don't worry, all right, you can come freely.

But that was the extent of the problem that Paul had to make this rule, isn't it? He even went so far as to abide by this rule himself, even though, as he now says, as gospel workers, they had a right to eat for free.

But no, he forgoes these rights in order to set an example. So I think therefore, laziness was a particular issue for the church among some of them.

[13 : 31] And we know this because in the first letter to the Thessalonians, he already raised that issue, and now he feels like he has to tackle it again. Now, ultimately, what Paul was concerned for wasn't just that they become busy, you know, but rather that they would work so that they would stop their disruptive behavior, which was preventing them from doing what's good.

What he wants for them to do, ultimately, is to live out their faith in obedience to the gospel. So I want to say then that I think Paul's act of forgoing his right is therefore not a universal rule to be applied.

For we read elsewhere in 1 Timothy chapter 5, Paul says that teaching elders deserve their wages. Scripture says do not muzzle the ox.

So this rule here, this forgoing of his rights, was Paul trying to address a specific issue in the church. He wanted to deprive the busy bodies from using himself as an excuse not to work themselves.

The reason is that if even those who preach the gospel work, then no one else is exempt. Now here I want to say that it's actually important to distinguish between working and doing what's good.

[14 : 54] In Paul's mind, they're not actually the same things. Working is about earning their food to eat, as he says in verse 12. Doing good, as I said before, is about living out the gospel.

Now sometimes that overlaps. So if you're a pastor like me or a missionary, then what you do for your work is what you're doing for good as well. But at other times, and I assume that will apply for many of you, your work primarily is to earn the food to eat.

Right? And then you are to consider how, whether it's work or whether it's outside of work, what you do is what's considered good, living out the gospel, whether you're paid to do so or not.

It's an important distinction because in verse 13, Paul then says, as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good. The you here, Paul is no longer talking to the idle believers.

Rather, he's talking about those whose faith and love are increasing, which he's already boasted of. And yet, Paul still encourages them never to tire of doing good because he fears that they will become weary.

[16 : 16] Why? Well, because they're living under persecution. The lies of Satan are tempting them all the time. And so, even if they don't want to give up their faith, they can tire of doing good.

You know, they're just going to be low-key Christians. just put their head down at work and just work to eat. After all, cost of living is increasing.

The demands on my time, whether it's in the family or not, it's growing. We are in that situation, aren't we, for many of us, coming out of COVID particularly.

We feel tired. And sometimes all we want to do is just get through the day, get through our job, make sure the pay goes into the bank account, and just get on with life.

And so as Christians individually, or whether for us as a church, living out the gospel faithfully can be hard work. I know that because you tell me about that.

[17 : 19] It requires God's strength. And so you see, we can be working hard, doing what Paul says, not being idle, not being disruptive, and yet still grow tired of doing good.

Can't we? And so the question here is not just about working harder, I don't think, but thinking about what good we are doing as we are either working or not working.

How are we living out the faith? How are we spreading the gospel and growing others in faith? It's not about doing more, but it's about working out whether what we're doing is what God intends for us to do, to be doing good.

Now, I don't think as a church our problem is so much being idle and disruptive. I don't see many idle and disruptive believers in our midst, thank God. I think instead many of us really are working hard, aren't we, to earn what we eat.

And our challenge really isn't so much about not working, but allowing work to distract us from doing what's good. We're in the territory of verse 13, aren't we?

[18 : 30] As opposed to verse 6. Now, not to say that we're all guilty of this, but I just want to acknowledge that this struggle is real, isn't it? Like the Thessalonians, we may desire goodness prompted by faith, and sometimes though, we feel we can't bring that desire to fruition.

And so, we can be tempted sometimes to just say, you know what, I'm too busy. So, what I'm going to do is I'm just going to give church, you know, give the church money and they can go and employ the pastors or the workers to do the gospel work.

Or they can give the money to missions to do the missionaries to do the work overseas or to AFES and they can get the Christian union staff workers to do the work.

But when we do that, we divide the church, don't we, between those who do gospel work and those who give money so that others can do the gospel work. But the Bible, that's not what the Bible says, is it?

Rather, the whole body of Christ is to do what's good. Everyone is to live out their faith, to obey the gospel, to spread the word, and to teach the truth. If you look at Ephesians chapter 4, Paul says that the pastor teachers are to equip the saints to do the work of ministry.

[19 : 46] The body is built up when each part does its work. And so, my job as a pastor is to equip all of you to serve God by doing what's good.

You're not paying me to do your work. Now, of course, I want to say here right now that I realize what a blessing it is for us as pastors not to have to separate our work to earn money to put foot on the table to doing what's good.

And that's because of your generosity. You recognize the value of having pastors freed up to focus on equipping and teaching the word. So that the body can serve effectively.

So, I thank God for that. I realize what a great blessing it is. But even though we focus on doing that, it's really the entire body, each and every believer that Paul instructs never to die in doing what's good.

Each of us is called to live out the gospel, whether it's on Sunday or through the week, whether it's at growth groups, doing outreach at Blackburn, at the markets, but also in our homes or at work.

[21 : 01] And so if you're a parent, and there may be just a few of you here, discipling your children so they follow Jesus is a really worthwhile and good thing to do. Never tire of doing that.

If you say a teacher in a Christian school, then you know, you can actually do what's good in your job itself, can't you? Because the school gives you that freedom to live out your faith openly.

But if, on the other hand, you're a teacher in a state school, then, well, your opportunities are a bit different, aren't they? But you still have the call to do what's good, isn't it? To let your obedience to the gospel shape how you work, what you say.

And that's the same, I think, with a lot of the rest of you in other types of jobs, in other types of corporations. You may do all these jobs primarily to earn what you eat, but there will still be opportunities to still do what's good, to live out the gospel, to perhaps share it with others when the opportunity arises.

So, don't separate necessarily the work you do to put food on the table and the things you do to live out your faith. It doesn't need to be the case all the time.

[22 : 15] Instead, I think the question to ask is, what are your motives at work? Is it driven by a desire to do good prompted by faith and perhaps even to work to eat?

Or is your motive for work driven by greed or selfish ambition? Now, of course, even when you've done that and done what's good and checked your motives, there is still the task, isn't there, of balancing the amount of time you put to work, primarily to eat, the good deeds that you do as a result of your faith, and perhaps even for Xbox?

Now, how much time should you dedicate, that's a really practical question, to ministry at church or other aspects of volunteering? Now, I'm not here to answer that question for you, although I could say probably less Xbox the better, but anyway, but you yourself will have to give an account to the Lord one day, wouldn't you?

And so that's a question you need to ask yourself, and find that right balance, and have your conscience clear, so that what you're doing, you know, is what God wants of you.

And that's why I think Paul ends with the warning in verse 14, to emphasize just how important this instruction is. So he says, take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter.

[23 : 37] It's quite, he's saying, work out who they are, you know, like look around, you know, who do you think is not doing what God wants of them? And then he says, do not associate with them in order that they may feel ashamed, yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer.

Now, that seems rather harsh, doesn't it? But the reason is that it's because someone's eternal fate is at stake, isn't it? And the health of the church as well, because if everyone, does this and, you know, the leaders turn a blind eye to it, then very soon everyone will be tempted, wouldn't they, to just stop doing what's good.

Now, the aim of Paul here is not to condemn or ostracize, it's quite clear, isn't it? Because he wants them to do it so as to restore the believer to faith and obedience.

And so here in this context, feeling ashamed isn't always a bad thing. You know, when you go to a party, for example, and everyone else brings a plate, and you didn't, how do you feel?

Ashamed, don't you? But that's a good kind of shame. I hope you do. Maybe embarrassed, okay. But that's a good kind of shame, isn't it? Because hopefully the next time, when you go to another party, you wouldn't do that again.

[25 : 00] So if shame motivates you to repentance and doing the right thing, that's actually a good thing, isn't it? It's only when we're ashamed for things we ought not to be, then that's a bad thing.

So for example, if we're ashamed by some other believer in our church who's contented in their job, you know, satisfied with how much they earn, and serving the Lord, that puts you to shame because you yourself, you're always so dissatisfied, you're wanting to chase promotions, you're watching the stock market to see how much money you've made for that day, then that's a good kind of shame, isn't it?

Because hopefully you look at that example, you repent, and you start doing what's good. You see, as Christians, we're called to prepare for the day of the Lord, aren't we?

Now Jesus could return anytime soon, even before I finish this sermon, and maybe after yesterday's election, some people hope that that's the case. Not saying anything.

But what does Paul say here? It doesn't mean we quit our jobs. It doesn't mean we become idle or disruptive just because the Lord might come. No, we're to keep working. Why?

[26 : 11] To put food on the table, but we're also to keep doing what's good, to never tire of doing it, even while we wait. You see, the world might be living life to the max, you know, max pleasure, max wealth, max fame, but we as Christians we're called to a different path, aren't we, of doing good, of obeying the gospel, growing in faith, increasing in love for one another, spreading the message, standing firm in the truth.

And that takes courage, doesn't it? When everyone else is doing something different and you're called to do this, and in one sense there may not be any reward just yet for it, we have to persevere, don't we?

We have to continue to trust the Lord and it can be unsettling, can't it? And that's why Paul ends with the prayer in verse 16 that when we do these things, we'll know the presence and peace of the Lord.

As we seek never to tire of doing what's good, Paul says God himself will be with us, to assure us, and comfort us. And so I'm going to close with this prayer that Paul prays.

May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way, even as we never tire of doing good, even as we may be persecuted for it.

[27 : 32] The Lord be with all of us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.