

SIGNS of *WHAT* TIMES?

Sermon, November 13, 2016

Texts: (Luke 21:5-19), II Thessalonians 3:6-13

In the course of preparing this sermon, it soon became evident it was going to be 'way too long, so I exercised a bit of pastoral prerogative and lopped off a good chunk of it ... mostly the part stemming from the lectionary Gospel reading for today (*some of you may be tempted to give the liturgical response, "Thanks be to God."*) In short, that Gospel passage has been interpreted by some over the centuries to be about the "signs of the times," meaning, "the signs of The END times." Except for a brief allusion to the end times later in the chapter, Jesus is basically telling His disciples about the times between now and the end ... that troubles will come, there will be wars and rumors of wars, there will be plagues ... and there will be elections ... and during those troubles Jesus is encouraging His followers to remain faithful, stand firm, KEEP WORKING, and do what you can to make these hard times BETTER ... in short, He calls His followers to be the "signs" during such hard times; to be signs and witnesses that show the way to the Way, the Truth and the Life in a lost and troubled world. Troubled times are not times for the faithful to retreat from the world and wait for Jesus to come and make it "all better;" these are times when we should be as faithful as ever! Some in the church in Thessalonica didn't "get" that ... many of them had simply stopped working, and were just waiting for what they thought was the imminent return of Jesus; that'll be the focus this morning, and we'll look at the Luke passage next week.

With that said, I considered changing the sermon's title to: "THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A FREE LUNCH," but (a) the bulletin was already printed, and (b) I didn't want to discourage anyone who didn't bring a plate from coming to the potluck luncheon following worship ... all are certainly welcome!

There really is a lot of wisdom summed up in that little phrase! It is a principle every single person needs to understand, that there is nothing in this world that comes without the work, at times the very hard work, of people. Those of us who are parents delight when our children start to understand and appreciate the hard work that goes into supplying needs, providing shelter, earning a living, and so on. There really is no free lunch! Nothing comes without the hard work and sacrifice of someone. I'll go to the edge of heresy and say that even our salvation isn't "free." Although it is freely offered by our gracious God, that salvation was paid for at a dear price by the hard work and sacrifice of our Lord. A few select quotes about work you may have heard before:

Credited to a man named Seymour T. Seymour: *"Work fascinates me ... I can sit and watch it for hours!"*

Another related one: *"Hard work may not kill me, but why take a chance?"*

One of my favorites, for in years past I've worked with people who've had this attitude: *"I don't mind going to work, but that 8-hour wait to go home is awful!"*

Theodore Roosevelt: *"Whenever you are asked if you can do a job, tell 'em, 'Certainly, I can!' Then get busy and find out how to do it." (In other words, be willing and eager to take advantage of an opportunity to work; you can learn to do just about anything if you put your heart and soul into it.)*

Indira Gandhi said, *"There are two kinds of people in this world: those who do the work and those who take the credit. Try to be in the first group ... there is less competition." That's the familiar quote, but what she added is not as familiar: "Have a bias toward action: let's see something happen now. Break the big plan into small steps and take the first step right away." (In other words, there may be many who can say what **should** be done, what **needs** to be done, what they would **like to see done** ... but few who will actually break that vision down into realistic, measurable steps to **get it done**, and even fewer who will actually take the first steps and **DO** something to fulfill that grand plan.)*

A classic debate within Christendom over the centuries has been over the issue of "Faith vs. Works;" i.e., are we saved through faith alone, or by some combination of faith and works? Without getting mired in the details of that perennial conversation, let me just give the short answer: the mark of genuine Christianity is neither faith nor works; the mark is having a faith *that goes to work!* A FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS A FAITH THAT DOESN'T WORK. And a faith that doesn't work is no faith at all. Faith not put into action is like a body without an animating spirit; it is dead. True faith, genuine faith, not only believes *in* God, but *believes* God, and responds accordingly.

Paul was having difficulty with some at the church in Thessalonica. Some of the faithful there were refusing to do their share of work. Paul writes in so many words, *"Keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. Follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. We worked night and day, laboring so we would not be a burden to any of you. 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 busyBODIES. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down, get to work, and earn the food they eat. And as for you ... *never tire of doing what is right.*"

That last line, "... *never tire of doing what is right,*" calls to mind the motto of the Mercedes-Benz automobile company that is tagged on all their commercials: "THE BEST OR NOTHING." I like it better in the original German: "DAS BESTE ODER NICHTS!" That ought to be every Christian's motto: "DAS BESTE ODER NICHTS!" We should never, ever tire of trying to do what is right, what is good, what is best. Let's not to waste our lives and our time, energy and/or resources doing and/or settling for what is less than best, doing and/or settling for what is wrong, doing and/or settling for what isn't right ... for our sakes, and for the sakes of those who love us and are depending on us.

Paul's concern was that some in Thessalonica were indeed faithful at work doing all they could, but others were not. I'm sure some of the slackers had their excuses; it's amazing how creative people can be in making excuses for avoiding work. To be sure, there are always some who legitimately ARE unable to work; they are to be loved and cared for. But it is classic human nature that all of us who are otherwise able-bodied can come up with many plausible reasons why we don't (*or won't*) do our work. Well, one of the "plausible" excuses of the Thessalonica slackers is that they were ... *waiting*. Waiting for what? They were waiting for Jesus to come back!

If you remember from last week, Paul had assured the Thessalonians, "*But Wait! There's More!*" Some believed Jesus had already returned, and that they had missed out, but Paul assured them Jesus had not yet returned yet, and that the best was yet to come. Unfortunately, it seems many of them took the "But Wait!" part too literally. They were piously withdrawing from the world, this world that to them was so far gone and just heading to hell in a hand basket anyway. Rather than working with the church to promote what is good and right and true, rather than working with the church to meet the needs of the hungry, rather than working with the church to overcome sickness and calamity in troubled times, rather than working with the church to bring children up with decent morals and religious principles and spiritual convictions, rather than working with the church at being the hands and feet of Jesus serving a world in very real need, these people were falling into a kind of religious escapism that basically said, "*Oh, ain't it all just awful. Nothing can be done about the world's condition, let us withdraw from the world and just wait for Jesus to come back.*" As a result they were simply dropping out, neither participating in nor supporting the work and ministry of that young church. Oh, they hadn't stopped believing; they had just quit doing anything practical about it. In short, *they weren't working*. Paul writes, in so many words, "NO! A faith without works is a faith that doesn't work. And a faith that doesn't work is no faith at all." Paul warns them against just idly waiting for Jesus to come and fix everything in a world so far gone. Paul warns them against sitting on their hands, letting others do the necessary work that needs to be done. Besides being utterly unhelpful to the efforts of the local church, there is just no personal joy, no fulfillment, to be found in that!

And apparently, these folks were not only idle, but they were constantly critical of those in the Thessalonica church who really *were* doing the work. These idlers weren't being busy; they were being busy *bodies*. And busybodies can and often do spend an inordinate amount of time criticizing those bodies who really *are* busy! These folks were doing more harm than good. They had become idle, poking themselves into other people's affairs, gossiping, and spreading all kinds of unhelpful talk and rumors. I like one person's definition of a busybody as "*a person who would rather listen to dirt than sweep it.*" Chuck Swindoll once wrote, "*There's a vast difference between putting your nose in other people's business and putting your heart into their problems.*" The latter takes work! People of faith who are actively involved, people who have a faith that works, have neither the time nor the inclination to be busybodies.

I've quoted from this before, but there is a delightful little book called *Life's Little Instruction Book: 511 Suggestions, Observations, and Reminders on How to Live a Happy and Rewarding Life* by H. Jackson Brown, Jr. These are 511 sayings and words of counsel he wrote to his son while his son was at college. I won't read all 511, but here are some samples, each of them really worthy of a sermon in themselves if we had the time: "*Compliment three people everyday*" ... "*Let people know what you stand for, and what you won't stand for*" ... "*Have a firm handshake*" ... "*Look people in the eye*" ... "*Pull your pants up*" (*that isn't really in there, I just made it up*) ... "*Stop blaming others*" ... "*Spend less time worrying who is right, and more time deciding what is right*" ... "*Don't use time or words carelessly, as neither can be retrieved*" ... "*Wear out, don't rust out.*" ... And one more: "*Avoid any church that has cushions on the pews.*" That last one implying we should be wary of a church that appears it just wants to be comfortable ... we're not about being comfortable, but about getting back out there to work!

Again, nothing comes without work, hard work. By the way, believers who've just stopped working is not simply a first century problem in Thessalonica. What to do about those people? Paul says two things: First, do not become like them! *Never tire* in doing what is right. Have a faith that goes to work! *Das Beste oder nichts!* Second, reach out to them. Bring them back! Help show them by your good work how to find the joy and fulfillment of being co-workers with Jesus Christ in the redemption of this world. Let them know there is ministry to be done and supported! Let them know there is joy to be found in having a faith that goes to work, and there is joy to be found in doing so! There is great fulfillment found serving this Jesus Who Was, Who Is, and Who Is to come. In short, let us help them, and help ourselves, find the immense and practical satisfaction of A FAITH THAT WORKS.