

BE A SIGN OF THE TIMES!

Sermon, November 13, 2022

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 made it a two part sermon (*and the liturgical response to that is, "Thanks be to God."*) Then when I settled into my sermon title, I couldn't get Petula Clark's popular sixties tune out of my head all week (*"It's a sign of the times, that your love for me is getting so much stronger ..."*).¹ We'll look at this Gospel passage in more detail next week, which has been interpreted by some over the centuries to be about the "Signs of the End of the Age" (*as subtitled in our NIV pew Bibles*) meaning, "the signs of The END times." Except for a brief allusion to the End Times later in the chapter, I think Jesus is basically telling His disciples here 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 problematic elections ... and during those troubles Jesus encourages His followers to remain faithful, stand firm, KEEP WORKING, and do and affirm what is right and good and holy, thus doing what you can to make the hard times BETTER ... in short, He calls His followers to **BE** the "signs" during such hard and troubled times; to be signs and witnesses who show the way to the Way, the Truth and the Life in a lost and troubled world.

What does it mean to be a witness of, or to witness for, Jesus Christ? Is being a witness something you say, or something you do, or something you are? The answer is ... **Yes**. A witness **is** something you are, but what you are **always** determines what you **say** and **do**. An excellent illustration of the Christian witness is that of a road sign. What are some distinctives of a good road sign? It matters little whether the sign is pretty or ugly, old or new, sharp or dull. It helps if the lettering is clear, but one essential feature of a good road sign is that it is firmly rooted and grounded, and will *consistently point in the right direction*. A road sign that is turned about by whichever way the wind is blowing is not much help; such a sign will invariably lead others astray. It is the nature and function of a good signpost to *stand firm and point the correct way*, come what may! The same holds true for a Christian signpost; a Christian witness points consistently in the right direction, it directs to Jesus, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

"And gradually, though no one remembers exactly how it happened, the unthinkable becomes tolerable. And then acceptable. And then legal. And then applaudable."

-Joni Eareckson Tada

Hear these words from Joni Eareckson Tada, from her book entitled *When Is It Right to Die? Euthanasia on Trial* -- *"And gradually, though no one remembers exactly how it happened, the unthinkable becomes tolerable. And then acceptable. And then legal. And then applaudable."* There's a sermon in itself here, but how many things that were unthinkable even twenty years ago have now become tolerable, then acceptable, then legal, then applaudable? These troubled times need faithful witnesses who by their lives, words and examples will stay rooted and established in the truth and help direct others accordingly. May our prayer be the prayer of our choir's anthem: *"Here I am, Lord."*

Nor are troubled times the times for the faithful to retreat and withdraw from involvement in the world and wait for Jesus to come and make it "all better;" hard times are precisely times when we should be as faithful and engaged as ever! Some in the church in Thessalonica apparently 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 our focus for this morning, and we'll look at the Luke passage next week.

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 of genuine Christianity is having a faith THAT works! 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 and lives and goes to work accordingly.

The apostle 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*

¹[Click here for Petula Clark "Sign Of The Times" on The Ed Sullivan Show - YouTube](#)

who is idle and does not live according to the tradition 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. As for you ... never tire of doing what is right."

That last line, "... never tire of doing what is right," calls to my mind the motto of the Mercedes-Benz automobile company: "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 and to be and to talk about and to learn what is right, what is good, what is best. Let's not waste our lives and our time, energy and/or resources doing or settling for what is less than best, doing or settling for what is wrong, doing 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. It's classic human nature that all of us can come up with many plausible reasons why we don't (*or won't*) do our best, our fair share, our responsibilities. He knew it is human nature to make excuses when our performance is not *Das Beste*. 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, well, *waiting*. Waiting for what? They were waiting for Jesus to come back!

And in the meantime they were piously withdrawing from the world, this world that to them was so far gone and just heading to Hades in a hand basket anyway. Rather than working with the church to promote and do 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 out there.. Nothing can be done about the world's condition, let us withdraw from the world and just wait for Jesus to come back and take care of things.*" As a result they were simply dropping out, neither participating in nor actively 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* ... and a faith that doesn't work is no faith at all.

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. As Paul intimates, 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.

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 and good and wholesome and helpful. 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. Let us remain faithful, stand firm, KEEP WORKING, and do what we can to redeem these hard times and make them BETTER, and thus be signs in our times, signs and witnesses that show the way to the Way, the Truth and the Life in a lost and troubled world.