

***“Do Not Grow Weary In Doing Good”***

(2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 3:6-13)

26<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. As we have now come to the second-to-last Sunday in the Church Year we are especially cognizant of the end times. Let us be clear about what the Lord teaches in His Word: you *are* living in the end times. You are -- right now -- living in the last days. That’s a fact. It is *also* a fact that Scripture teaches – clearly – that no one knows when Christ will come again (Acts 1:7) and it is also a fact that these last days may come to an end today or tomorrow, *or* long after you and I have died. We just don’t know when the end will occur and God makes it clear that it is not for us to know anyway. *In spite of this clarity on the matter, however, it is simply incredible to observe the unceasing fanaticism regarding the end that we see all around us.*

Many of you are aware that this area of eschatology (end time teaching) and apocalyptic (the kind of genre represented by Revelation and Ezekiel) -- esp. as it is employed in popular American theology -- is my favorite area in sacred theology. My concern for this grew out of a childhood experience: my big brother Robert (a good reader his entire life) had a fascinating collection of books in our room. One of those books was Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth*. That book was the #1 best-seller of all books, of all genres and types in the decade of the 1970’s in the United States of America, selling about 30 million copies. The theology represented by that book which fully claims to accurately represent the teaching of God’s Word is both wrong and scary. All of the 21 plagues described in the book of Revelation -- which we understand as representing what sin has already brought into the world and already remedied by Jesus -- are said to be coming in our *future* (keep in mind that this is a gross mishandling of the book of Revelation). In Lindsey’s book *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* Christians were to consider the likelihood that the decade of the 1980’s would be the last of history as we know it, and in a later Lindsey book *Planet Earth – 2000 A.D.* Christians received a revised and updated prediction that by the year 2000 they should not anticipate being on earth.

But predictions of the end are nothing new. Like Harold Camping who predicted that the end of the world would occur on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2011, and then adjusted his prediction to October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2011, William Miller before him first predicted March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1843 and then revised his prediction to March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1844 (Rowe, *God’s Strange Work*, 176). When Jesus did not come as predicted, this led to what historians refer to as “The Great Disappointment.” “There is no doubt that many Millerites, as reported, gave away or sold their possessions, stopped working,

paid off debts, and settled old quarrels (ibid, 190).” But when the prediction failed, do you think that was going to stop predictions of the end? Not even close!

Hal Lindsey belongs to this tradition (as did the late Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel and of course as my favorite example Tim LaHaye of *Left Behind* fame does). These Christian teachers believe that when Jesus in Matthew 24:34 and Luke 21:32 referred to “this generation,” that that generation is *the* generation that is connected to the modern state of Israel coming into existence in 1948. Now if a “generation” is about 40 years, one can see why someone like Hal Lindsey would like 1988: 1948 + 40 years in a generation = 1988. One of the in-house debates of those who think this way is to try to establish what is meant by “a generation.” Is it 40, 60, or 80 years or more? Or should the counting begin not with 1948, but 1967 when Israel took Jerusalem during the Six Day War? Tim LaHaye has given himself more wiggle room and has warned us that the rapture – as they understand it – will occur before the beginning of 2025 (*Are We Living in the End Times*, 61). Once again, the predictions just keep coming. It seems inevitable for example that just as December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012 received immense press, that when 2029/2030 and 2032/2033 roll around in relation to the crucifixion of our Savior, we will see all of the excitement all over again...but I’d better be careful now, because now *I’m* making predictions!

All of this dear Christians is precisely the trouble that Saint Paul was dealing with when he wrote the letters to the Thessalonians. We have end-time mania now, we had it in the 1900’s, in the 1800’s (and throughout history), and it was very much alive and well in the first-century A.D. when Saint Paul wrote the first verse of our epistle this morning (2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 3:6):

***Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.***

What does it mean to “walk in idleness” and to do so “not in accord with the tradition [that is apostolic teaching]?” The spectacular and extremely practical teaching coming out of our epistle is on how *our work*, our labor, our vocations, our jobs, our careers -- what God has given us to live on, by which and through which we are able to take care of ourselves -- these are the God-given gifts that occupy our time in God’s service in the world and in society. Your labor, your work, your living keeps you – as the saying goes – “out of trouble,” it keeps you “busy” in the best sense of the word so that you are productive in using the gifts, the skills, and abilities that God has given you in order to help people around you. That is, ***the best way to avoid worrying about the end of the world and avoiding a***

***religious fanaticism about predictions and such is to work, to labor, and to provide for yourself...this honors God, it serves people, and it provides clarity for living.***

Religious and spiritual fanaticism, however, was taking over the hearts and minds of some of the members of the church in Thessalonica. "In view of the nearness of the [second coming of Christ] (as they thought) they were refraining from doing any work. They would find such conduct all the easier in view of the Greek idea that labor was degrading (Morris, Leon, *The New International Commentary On The New Testament: The First and Second Epistles To The Thessalonians*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Co., 1959:251)."

Through Saint Paul God was commanding His faithful church to "keep away from" Christians behaving this way. The Lord's intention was to convict and shame the idle Christians (so as to lead them to repentance), and also to protect the faithful Christians who might otherwise be tempted to follow suit. Part and parcel of Christian discipleship is being responsible in our duties pertaining to the civil realm.

Saint Paul went on to emphasize the importance of our work, our labor, and livelihood in relation to our walk with the Lord and our identity as faithful Christians through these strong words at verse 10:

***For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.***

This is known as "the Golden Rule of work (*The Lutheran Study Bible*, 2064)." And it reminds us of how the Word of the Lord commends hard work and making a living through what we can learn from ants and bees...that's right, I said ants and bees:

**Proverbs 6:6-11:** <sup>6</sup>"Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. <sup>7</sup>Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, <sup>8</sup>she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. [The Septuagint extends this verse with the words: "*Or go to the bee, and learn how diligent she is, and how earnestly she is engaged in her work; whose labours kings and private men use for health, and she is desired and respected by all: though weak in body, she is advanced by honouring wisdom* (Brenton, tran., *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986:793.)"] <sup>9</sup>How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? <sup>10</sup>A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, <sup>11</sup>and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man."



Chrysostom provided a great commentary on the ants and bees for you and for me: “Marvel at the Lord, not only because he has made heaven and the sun, but because he has also made the ant. For although the ant is small, it proves the greatness of God’s wisdom. Consider, then, how prudent the ant is. Consider how God has implanted in so small a body such an unceasing desire for work! But while you learn the lesson of hard work from the ant, learn from the bee a lesson of neatness, industry and social concord! For the bee labors more for us than for herself, working every day. This is indeed a thing especially proper for a Christian, not to seek his own welfare, but the welfare of others. As, then, the bee travels across the meadows that she may prepare a banquet for another, so also O man, you do likewise. And if you have accumulated wealth, spend it on others. If you have the ability to teach, do not bury the talent, but bring it out publicly for the sake of those who need it! Or if you have any other advantage, become useful to those who reap the benefit of your labors (*Ancient Christian Commentary, IX: 123*).”

In our sin, we develop all kinds of unsavory perspectives about our work. How easy it is for us – whether on account of end-time concerns or other so-called “spiritual” or “religious” convictions and concerns – to consider our work as nothing but drudgery; that it is anything but good; and that it seems sometimes not really important (that it really does not matter). These things are not true and we sin when we give ourselves excuses not to be busy in our work, but instead busybodies who take advantage of other people and try to justify our time waxing eloquent about higher spiritual callings while neglecting the blessed vocations God puts in our

hands. Lenski wrote simply that Saint Paul was “voicing the gospel which requires honest work from all who profess faith in the gospel...This word condemns not only the professed lazy Christian; it condemns also him who proposes to live richly without making an honest return (*The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, 462).” It matters how we live dear Christians, and it matters how we work. This is an extraordinary teaching, because through faith in Jesus, how you make a living – or how you support that living as my wife supports me, without which I simply could not do what I do...and she works just as much as I – is part and parcel our service to God and our service to our fellow-human beings. Such service – again – not only keeps us out of trouble (while avoiding for example fanatical end-time movements that would suggest you quit your jobs), but it allows us to remember the holiness of our sacred vocations: as you work, God serves through you those you serve! In this way, God has made what you do for a living (unless it is inherently immoral) a holy thing and we sin when we just refuse to acknowledge this truth.

In the meantime, we are simply warned to watch out for busybodies who may try to take advantage of us. From the *Didache*: “But let every one that cometh in the name of the Lord be received, and afterward ye shall prove and know him; for ye shall have understanding right and left. If he who cometh is a wayfarer, assist him as far as ye are able; but he shall not remain with you, except two or three days, if need be. But if he willeth to abide with you, being an artisan, let him work and eat; but if he hath no trade, according to your understanding see to it that, as a Christian, he shall not live with you idle. But if he willeth not so to do, he is a Christ-monger. Watch that ye keep aloof from such (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 7:381).” A “Christ-monger” is a “Christ-trafficker,” someone who tries to take advantage of Christian fellowship and hospitality.

God’s remedy to this kind of false-lifestyle is simple and direct:

***Verse 12: “Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”***

We must pray, however, for discernment. We must not let our hearts turn cold. We are called to serve and to help those in need. At the same time, we must guard against the situation when those we help are trying to take advantage. Along the way, we might just be tempted to throw our hands in the air and say, “Forget about it! I’m just done with trying to help at all period!” And this is the context for the final words of our epistle:

***Verse 13: “As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.”***

In my estimation Calvin hit the nail on the head:

“It often happens that those who are otherwise particularly ready and eager to do good grow cold on seeing that they have spent their favours to no purpose by misdirecting them. Paul therefore admonishes us that although there are many who are undeserving, and others who abuse our generosity, we are not on this account to give up helping those who need our aid. His statement is worth noting – however the ingratitude, annoyance, pride, impertinence, and other unworthy behavior on the part of the poor may trouble us, or discourage and disgust us, we must still strive never to abandon our desire to do good (Torrance, David W. and Torrance, Thomas F., eds., *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries: Romans and Thessalonians*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960:420):”

This epistle is all law. It teaches us about how to live, but let me extend the theme just a little and remind us of the greater Gospel in connection to these themes: the blood of Christ which forgives our sins and His glorious resurrection which has transferred us from death and to life, has given to us a peace and a confidence that quite frankly puts life in perspective and spares us from the anxiety and fear of alarmist views and popularist religious movements; it is the Gospel that also sanctifies what we do in “our everyday lives,” it is the life of Jesus that we carry with us that makes the work of His children important and sacred. Even if you work at a fast-food restaurant, when you hand your customer a hamburger, then God is working through you to keep that customer alive. The Gospel, the forgiveness of sins...the answer to hopelessness, meaningless, and death...is what sanctifies your work and your life. This is why Saint Paul also said: ***“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ (Colossians 3:23-24).”*** Come now to receive the Holy Sacrament so that you will be assured that Christ goes with you in your every-day work, in your every-day labor so that your work is also God’s work, a sanctified work, an important work, a work through which the Lord Himself is serving others through you and a work which not only provides for you, but protects you from the busybody-syndrome.

