

Whatever we may think of the apostle Paul, he was not a lazy person. Idleness just wasn't a part of his DNA; it's not who he was. From this letter you get the distinct feeling that Paul doesn't really think that true Christians can be lazy people either. When he writes to the church in Thessalonica, he says, "*For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work*" (v. 11).

It's not that the church at Thessalonica was full of lazy people, but clearly there were some. Paul's letter is not to the lazy Christians themselves; they're probably too lazy to read his letter and too lazy to care. Paul is addressing those Christians who are not lazy, not idle. Paul speaks to these hard-working men and women: "*Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness*" (v. 6). Perhaps Paul thinks that idleness is contagious, and if Christians hang around lazy people we are likely to pick up some lazy habits ourselves.

We know how important it is to seek the company of those who lift us up, who make us better, who call us to reach farther and climb higher. Hang too long around the wrong crowd and soon we begin to adopt their bad habits. Like the canary that loses its song when slumming with sparrows, we Christians can lose our song when casting our lot with those who care too little for spiritual things, who care too little for improving the fortunes of others, who care too little for self-improvement, who care too little for serving God. Paul "commands" us to watch the company we keep. That's good advice.

But perhaps we're not being fair to these so-called "idle" Christians in the Thessalonian church. There is a backstory, after all. In chapter 2, Paul warns the church not to assume "*that the day of the Lord is already here*" (2:2). God chose this group of believers "*as the first fruits,*" but the full harvest is not yet attained (2:13).

It seems that a number of Thessalonian Christians are so eager for the coming of the *eschaton* – the end of days – that they've put aside all thought of worldly employment. They are sitting and waiting for Jesus to return. They think, "Why punch the time clock when the Lord could arrive on any day or at any hour?" Are they truly lazy or are they are simply being pragmatic? After all, it doesn't make sense to go back to your job at *Subway*™ when you just won the \$350 million Powerball, does it? Similarly, why would a Thessalonian Christian go back to his job at the spice market when the return of Christ is imminent?

A fuller understanding of the word "imminent" is helpful here. Most of us hear the word "imminent" and think "immediate," as in Christ is coming any minute now. But "imminent" may also mean that Christ's coming is assured or guaranteed. Thus, the imminent return of Christ should not be thought is a "immediate" as much as it is "expected." We may not know the day or hour when he comes, but Christ will surely return, and we must be ready when he does.

Paul reminds Christians to *carry on as though the Lord may delay and not return in our lifetimes*. He urges Christians to live morally, ethically and spiritually prepared as though Christ may return at any moment. And if Christ should delay his return, Christians should be found hard at work for God's Kingdom when Christ appears.

Paul also reminds Christians of a simple motivational rule: "*Anyone unwilling to work should not eat*" (v. 10). Hunger pangs do have a way of motivating people. Captain John Smith realized this, and he used this very Bible verse in the early days of the Jamestown colony to force the haughty cavaliers under his command to cease their idle, gentlemanly pursuits and to start planting corn. The Bible's advice, then, to us is to continue "planting corn" and to be faithful in our relationships with God and each other. "*May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ*" (v. 5).

Just before bestowing the benediction that ends this brief letter, Paul sums up his motivational advice in proverbial form: "*Do not be weary in doing what is right*" (v. 13). It can be difficult to persevere in doing what is honorable and right, even what's necessary, when there is apparently no reward for doing so. This is why he wrote to the Corinthian Christians, "*Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain*" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Our work is not in vain. The Bible offers abundant reassurance that those who work faithfully will have their reward. "*The LORD rewards everyone for their righteousness and faithfulness*" (1 Samuel 26:23, NIV). "*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving*" (Colossians 3:23-24, NIV). So, Paul's word to the Thessalonians, the busy ones and the lazy ones, is, "*Do not be weary in doing what is right.*"

So, can a Christian be lazy. Paul's answer is a resounding, "no!" *Christians, by definition, are not lazy people.* It is not how God created us. It is not in our DNA.

We know that there is value and virtue in honest work.

We believe that disciples of Jesus are to share the good news of his gospel.

We recognize that we are to work for justice and to seek help for the oppressed.

We understand that our mission is to be servants to others in the name of Christ.

We do not to expect others to support us (even Paul earned his keep as a tentmaker!).

Failure in any one of these points calls into question our commitment to Jesus and our understanding of his gospel.

Now, I realize that this is not new news to any of you. Federated Folk are about as industrious as they come. I can't think of a service group, a charitable organization or a government agency in town that doesn't have a Federated Church member serving on it. Which is awesome and inspiring! And, according to Paul, just how it should be. So, heed his words, not as an admonition to do more, but to keep doing the good things you are already doing.

Because you get it! Christians are not lazy people. Christians are hard workers. And you get this, not by hacking into your brains, but by hacking into your hearts where the Word of God lives in you, and the love of Christ grows in you, and the Holy Spirit encourages you to reach out to share the hope that you have in Jesus. Tomorrow, I want you to enjoy your Labor Day holiday – you've earned it! Then, on Tuesday, be ready to get back to work or school and never "be weary in doing what is right."

Prayer: Worker God, whose hands built the earth, molded our bodies, and sowed the stars across the sky, we gather in your presence this morning with praise and thanksgiving for your mighty deeds. Meet us here, Worker God; strengthen our hearts and our hands to work with you in the building of a world filled with justice and peace. Amen.

Source: Chen, Angus. "Could you hack your brain to get more motivated?" *National Public Radio Website*. npr.org. March 3, 2016. Retrieved August 29, 2016.

Can a Christian Be Lazy?

Labor Day Sunday, September 2, 2018

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Pastor Doug Dent

Hacking is a common word these days. Businesses, governments, politicians, celebrities and even private citizens worry about having their personal and professional information "hacked." Hacking means using a computer to gain unauthorized access to the data in a system. Hackers find ways to circumvent online security safeguards and firewalls so that they can access a company's information and processing systems.

On a similar theme, neuroscientists are asking, "What if we could hack into the human brain?" Recent developments in science and technology may soon make it possible for scientists to hack into untapped regions of the human brain, releasing a world of new human potential. It's too soon to tell how far brain-hacking may go, but early discoveries include a "motivational button" in the brain that could help us fight laziness.

A news story published by NPR (March 2016) reported on the work of Dr. Alison Adcock, a medical researcher at Duke University. Adcock and her team put 73 different test subjects into a scanner, like an MRI machine, allowing them to identify which areas of the brain are used for different types of activities.

Test subjects watched on a screen as certain areas of their brains lit up. These visual cues provided a sort of feedback loop. As patients experienced feelings of being highly motivated, they noted the engagement of certain areas of their brains. Moments later, they found themselves able to concentrate on getting that same region of the brain to light up again, thus sustaining their feelings of motivation.

Could medical science be developing a way to hack into our brains to help us leap out of our lethargy, renew our work, and resume our responsibilities? Perhaps. It's an intriguing idea! And that idea connects to today's theme as announced by the apostle Paul when he scolds some of the Thessalonian Christians for their "idleness" (v. 6) and urges them to persist in the "*toil and labor*" (v. 8) of everyday life.