

Sermon: The Holiness of Ordinary Work

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, November 16, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Just a few days ago, my son Justin put me to the test. He asked me a hypothetical scenario, of how I would respond should a mother call St. Giles, asking for help in getting baby formula. I paused, considered and responded that I would not give out money to a total stranger, but would offer to accompanying her to buy the formula she needs.

It is something that I had actually done, a few times, not for baby formula but other grocery items. St. Giles does have a benevolence fund set up specifically for such a purpose, and the Minister has complete discretion as to when and how the fund is to be used to help people in need. Given that the cost of baby formula has skyrocketed in recent years, up 84% since 2017, as reported by CBC, this hypothetical scenario painted by Justin is not completely out of the realm of possibility.

Upon hearing my response, Justin nodded his head in approval and told me the reason why he asked. Apparently, a TikToker by the name of Nikalie Monroe has been doing precisely that—calling churches and asking for help in getting baby formula. Just to be clear, she is not a mother, and does not have a starving two-month-old. Monroe is doing this purely as a social experiment. In an October 31 video, which has gone mega viral garnering millions of views, she explained saying “I’m actually going to be testing and seeing if local churches in my area first are willing to help somebody that’s in need when they call up and ask for help.”

And the early result is not good—out of 42 churches she called, 33 of them refused to help, despite recording of a crying baby playing in the background. Some directed her to other organizations, but did not offer to help her themselves. Upon hearing from Monroe the nature of her social experiment, one person who didn’t help actually hung up on her. Just to be clear, she has been diligently posting every one of her calls online for all to hear.

Based on the responses Monroe were getting, many have praised her effort, but some in those ‘refused to help’ churches are calling this entire fiasco ‘a spiritual warfare’, essentially demonizing her attempt in exposing the hypocrisy of certain Christian congregations. It would seem the bigger the churches grow, the less likely they were to offer help a desperate mother with a starving baby. As far as I know, this experiment is still being conducted in the United States. I wonder

how much better or worse we in Canada might fare. But I did tell Justin that I think most Presbyterian churches in this city would pass the test. I hope I am not wrong on that.

This entire ordeal does call into question our theological understanding of Christian hospitality, which is what we are asked to consider in our Scripture reading today, in 2 Thessalonians 3, particularly the command from Paul in verse 10: *“anyone unwilling to work should not eat”*. How should we understand such a command for the Christian community? Let's unpack that.

First of all, this is not a command for the community to shun its idle members. In fact, Paul in an earlier letter, in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, specifically urges brothers and sisters in Christ to “admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak”, and most importantly, to be patient with them all.

The community of faith is made up of people of all social-economic backgrounds; it is composed with people of variety of gifts and skills. The church endeavours to pool all these people and resources together, and endeavours to share them equitably across the board. In the very first church in Jerusalem, people were voluntarily selling all their properties and placing them at the feet of the Apostles, for the use of the Church.

Now the Church, being an human organization called by the Spirit, but still human nonetheless, there are some whose work is more salient than others; some who work more, more productive than others. But it is critical we remember Paul's teaching elsewhere, particularly in 1 Corinthians 12 that, *“the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect”*.

Second, Paul is addressing individuals who were unwilling to work, not those who, for one reason or another, unable. There is no suggestion that dependents are being criticized for their dependency alone. In fact, a careful reading of 2 Thessalonians 3 would tell us that Paul is more concerned with those living irresponsibly, not merely being idle.

The problem with being idle is that it accorded people with too much time to spend on unproductive and unhelpful things. The real issue facing the Thessalonians faith community, as you may recall in my sermon last week, was the idle speculation of the Day of the Lord, or as some would call it the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Some in that congregation had taken on an erroneous view, an idle speculation no more, that such second coming was in fact already taking place, that the promised vision of Isaiah 65, of the new heaven and new earth, was already being realized. Oh what a vision that is:

*"No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it
or the cry of distress.
No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime...
before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear....
the wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox...
they shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain."*

Evidently, some in the community of faith in Thessalonica had enjoyed the posture of daydreaming on such things a bit too much. They had conveniently ignored an obvious but often overlooked fact that, even in the vision of Isaiah 65, work or labouring does not cease to exist, as prophesied in verse 21-23,

*"They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat,
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labor in vain."*

It is a point that Paul picked up, as he simply consoled the Thessalonians: Stop daydreaming! Get back to work! No work, no eat!

Finally, I need to say a few words on the nature of work in a faith community. It is not paid work as we understand it in the secular society. Work in a Christian community points to the cooperative and reciprocal activities that shape and mold individuals into a cohesive people of God, into the body of Christ. These cooperative activities develop moral characters, grow our capacity to do good, and increase our resiliency to face challenges. Work are practices that are shared, patterned, and learned from example, and can thus be taught, passed on to the next generation.

Some of the more common Christian practices of work are communal worship, singing hymns and songs of praise, praying the Lord's Prayer, unison prayer confession, keeping Sabbath, tithing, hospitality, contributing and putting together shared meals, or supporting one another materially. In short, things that

Christians communities have always done well throughout the past two thousand years, and I should add that St. Giles is no exception.

We practice all these with the reciprocal expectation that all who join the community of faith would each shoulder the burden of labour for the sake of the common good. Such work is rather ordinary not extraordinary, but is it nevertheless, in the eyes of God, holy.

In preparation for this sermon during this past week, I got a call late Thursday afternoon. Actually Rose, our Church Administrator got the call from a distraught mother, whose son was badly burned and asking to speak to the minister. I was already home by then, but Rose knew to call me right away. The mother did not leave her name, but left a number to call back. So I did. She was very appreciative, and informed me that she had contacted another congregation, and they are already sending someone to help. She asked that I simply pray for her son—Ovanus is his name. So I did and still do.

I don't know if this was a really an emergency or perhaps a social experiment by a TikToker. It really doesn't matter. I am glad that the spirit of generosity and Christian hospitality seem to be alive and well in this city. I shall endeavour to continue to do the work that God has called me to do, ordinary and holy.

I shall leave with you the words of Jesus in John 13:12-17. This happened during the evening of the Passover Feast, shortly before the Lord was betrayed:

*"When he had finished washing their feet,
he put on his clothes and returned to his place.
"Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them.
"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am.
Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet,
you also should wash one another's feet.
I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.
Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master,
nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.
Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**