

Living
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Ephesians 1:11-23

¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

¹⁵I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason

¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Luke 6:20-31

²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

‘Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ ‘Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

‘Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

²² ‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

²⁴ ‘But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ ‘Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

‘Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶ ‘Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

²⁷ ‘But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

A Jimmy Buffett song, which credits its inspiration in the inscription to Mark Twain's *Following the Equator*, is titled That's What Living Is To Me. The refrain gives the song its title and begins with the Twain inscription: "Be good and you will be lonesome / Be lonesome and you will be free / Live a lie and you will live to regret it / That's what living is to me / That's what living is to me."¹ I can't help but think of this song's refrain when I read both of our readings from today.

It is debated whether Paul is the true author of 2 Thessalonians because there are some notable differences between this letter and others known to be his, including 1 Thessalonians, which speaks of the day of Lord as coming soon. Our reading today, you'll note, is warning the first readers not to be alarmed or shaken by those who would claim the day of the Lord has arrived. Apparently someone or – ones had been pretending to be Paul in correspondence with those in Thessalonica and was suggesting the end was at hand. The people, sensing their time to do the work of the Lord was running short, began to give up doing what they had set out to do under Paul's good advice, which was to live to the Lord in word and deed. Whether it was Paul or not who wrote the words, they hold important meaning to all who "slack off" thinking their deeds are not necessary.

Living in a world with common apocalyptic predictions, we are less prone to ease up on living Christian lives because we think the time is coming where Christ will return and redeem everything. It's not that we don't believe it – it's just that we're not sure we know when it will be. It is an odd advantage that we have as we are further removed from Christ's first coming – for the most part, we have given up counting on human predictions of Christ's second coming because we've seen so many proven false. We are far more likely to ease up because we are tired or feel downtrodden or, worst of all, hopeless.

It's not hard to imagine feeling like the work we do is futile when the news reminds us of how much more work there is to do, when we think we have hardly made a dent in the needs of Haiti and New Jersey and now there is the Philippines. I could go on and on with examples of work still needing to be done, and we'd all certainly leave here feeling dejected and hopeless but that's not my aim, nor the aim of the author of 2 Thessalonians. Pastor Neta Pringle sees instead the encouragement in the letter and says, "The work for justice and peace is too often slow and discouraging. There are times when evil seems to hold far too much power. If we can hang onto the promise that its power is limited, that it will not have the final say, then we can continue the struggle."² This builds on the words of the letter's author: "So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us."

¹ Jimmy Buffett, *That's What Living Is To Me*. MCA Records, 1988. CD.

² *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 282.

Trappist Monk Thomas Merton wrote to a discouraged friend:

Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. And there too a great deal has to be gone through, as gradually you struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. The range tends to narrow down, but it gets much more real. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything... The big results are not in your hands or mine, but they suddenly happen, and we can share in them; but there is no point in building our lives on this personal satisfaction, which may be denied us and which, after all, is not that important... You are probably striving to build yourself an identity in your work, out of your work and your witness. You are using it, so to speak, to protect yourself against nothingness, annihilation. That is not the right use of your work. All the good that you will do will not come from you but from the fact that you have allowed yourself, in the obedience of faith, to be used by God's love. Think of this more, and gradually you will be free from the need to prove yourself, and you can be more open to the power that will work through you without your knowing it... The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see. If we can do His will, we will be helping in this process. But we will not necessarily know all about it beforehand.³

Stand firm and hold fast. "You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect... The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see." Stand firm and hold fast. Go about living, not as if your work did not matter, but as if it matters very much. Pastor Pringle says this, too: "live as if the Day of the Lord has already come... Knowing that God will triumph and the work of God's people will be vindicated is a powerful motive to work for justice and peace even in times of discouragement."⁴ When we give up on our own work, we are giving up on God's redeeming power.

It is this redeeming power on which Jesus was educating the Sadducees. The Sadducees believed only what could be found in the written Torah, the first five books of the Bible, whereas the Pharisees, Jesus' more common challengers, believed in the oral tradition of interpretation as well as the additional wisdom writings and prophecy writings. In this teaching Jesus was aligned with the Pharisees. What Jesus is telling the Sadducees is that life after an earthly death is nothing like earthly life. Not all of our goals, our purposes, will be the same. In this life, men married their brother's widow to keep his name, his lineage, his faith alive throughout generations. In an eternal life, there is no need and so no need for marriage. "Like angels" means to have life eternal, and thus to have no need for

³ James C. Howell *The Beatitudes for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 280.

descendants. What does remain the same is that we are always called to be partners in God's work of creation and redemption. In this life we just do it differently. Professor Eberhard Busch explains it this way:

What Jesus points out to the Sadducees is that eternal life is not simply the continuation of mortal life beyond death. Whatever the reality is on the other side of earthly life, we should not think of it as a continuation of this life that affords us an opportunity to complete still imperfect works. Indeed, we humans have to do *now* what we can do for the good...⁵

We have to do now what we can do for the good. That's what living means to me.

Last week we talked about Luke's Beatitudes. Blessed are you who are hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed. To live this life of a follower is not to make friends - not too far from "Be good and you will be lonesome." Living the gospel will cause some people to hate you, to look down on you, to mock you. What is different now from the time of earliest Christians is that the world is filled with followers who are allies and co-workers, who become friends. Being good doesn't mean being lonesome anymore. The letter of 2 Thessalonians encouraged its listeners, and us, to not heed those who would have you believe that living to God's glory is not necessary nor useful, for that is a lie and not one we should live. Stand firm and hold fast.

Let us pray: Father, Son, and Spirit, comfort our hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word, we pray. Amen.

⁵ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 286.