

How Should Christians Approach Benevolence?

Guests: Chase Turner and Brandon Britton

WES: Welcome to the Radically Christian Bible study podcast. I'm your host, Wes McAdams. Here, we have one goal: Learn to love like Jesus. Today on our Bible study we are going to be talking about II Thessalonians 3:10. This is a question that was sent in around the phrase that if a person won't work, then they shouldn't eat. What does that phrase mean? How should we apply it to the church and to our lives? What meaning should it have for us? And is it possible to abuse this passage? Has this passage been abused in the past?

So today I have two of my friends that have joined me, Brandon Britton and Chase Turner. Welcome, guys. Brandon, how are you, Brother?

BRANDON: I'm doing great. Glad to be here with you, Wes. Nice to be here with Chase.

WES: It is fantastic to have you with us. The last time you were on the podcast, my mom couldn't stop talking about how much she loved everything that you had to say, and she's like, "You need to have that guy back on more often." So for my own sake and for my mother's sake, and for everyone else that wanted to see you back on, I appreciate you coming back on, Brother.

BRANDON: Anytime. My wife and I love everything that y'all are putting out ourselves, so it was fun to get to contribute.

WES: Well, thanks for all you do, Brother.

And, Chase, welcome back. Two weeks in a row. I appreciate you

coming back on, Brother.

CHASE: Oh, my pleasure to be here. Appreciate the invite instead of, "Hey, you can't come back," so -- no, I enjoyed the conversation last week. Looking forward to this week, as well.

WES: Well, for those that weren't with us last week, I introduced the idea that for the next few weeks we're going to be having on several preachers that I just think the absolute world of, and you guys inspire me, you encourage me, you teach me so very much, and I thought it would be great to sort of have a roundtable where we could sit around and discuss, and other people could sort of be a fly on the wall and listen to us talk about scripture and how it applies to our lives. So I really appreciate not only you guys being here today, but also all that you do for the kingdom, so thank you, guys.

Let's jump into this conversation, but before we get into the passage, I kind of want to talk about it from a relevance standpoint first. Let's just kind of talk about benevolence and charity and helping people, feeding people, taking care of people, because that's eventually, I think, where we're going to go with this conversation, but let's just talk about it in a very broad sense outside of II Thessalonians. What sort of ideas and themes and instructions do we have in the New Testament, in scripture, that should shape our thinking as it pertains to the issue of helping people and feeding people?

Brandon, we'll kind of start with you, if you don't mind.

BRANDON: Well, you know, two things pop into my mind just right away on that question. One of them is applied to Jesus, and one of them, I think, Paul was just speaking in general to the church at Galatia. I love the passage that says Jesus "went about doing good." He went about doing good, and I think that is such a

simplified way of addressing what it means to follow The Way. And one of the beauties of that is you're pretty -- it's pretty unlimited in ways that you can go about doing good, so you have a lot of creativity, a lot of personal spin on things that maybe you are more passionate about than somebody else might be. And then kind of to back that up, Paul, in Galatians 6, saying that as we have the opportunity, let us do good unto all men and especially to the family of God, and so you kind of take the first idea and you build on it with the second one.

This whole idea that gets wrapped up in those two little passages is that everybody is in that purview of who is -- who are the people I'm trying to help? Well, everybody. Sometimes it's my brothers and sisters; sometimes it's people that don't know Christ. But do good. Go about doing good, and as you have an opportunity -- which, again, that could look like a million different things. And for me, personally, just -- it's a liberating thought for me to think that I want to do good, it's a biblical mandate, it's Christlike, and I'm pretty much unlimited in the avenues and opportunities and ways that I can express that. So, you know, to use Paul's language in Galatians again, it's freedom. He's describing freedom in Christ, because not all of us have the same -- I know some people, the way that they do good to others is they cook meals. They cook them all the time. I literally know a lady that is practically cooking meals every day for somebody. That wouldn't work for everybody. There's no way that some people could do that. And those people, sometimes maybe they're just writing checks. Maybe they've got good jobs and they're very busy and they make a lot of money, and they're like, "Look, I don't have time to cook you a meal, but I can write a check to buy the groceries for it, or I can, you know, pay for it or get a gift card," or whatever, and so I just love the idea of simplifying things. Do good, when you have the opportunity, to anyone

that you have the opportunity to do it to, and you're unlimited in how you can do that good.

WES: Yeah. Chase, how about you? What would you add to that?

CHASE: Wow, that was pretty encompassing, the answer. I loved what he had to say. The first person that popped into mind was Jesus, and, really, his instruction to do good, not just through his example, but it was something he expected of his followers. In Matthew 6, right before he teaches them to pray, he says, "When you're helping the needy," and that's translated a number of ways, but it's funny he didn't say, "When you're helping Christians." He said, "When you're helping the needy," and so the idea there was everybody. Everybody has need. When you're helping them -- one, it's expected, but, two, it's don't do it so that other people see you, and so there's that Pharisaical context of how we help, when we help, those kinds of things, in that context of do it to all people and do it because it's the right thing to do; it's the good thing to do, not because other people are going to see you do it. And so that was the main thing.

And, I guess, secondary to that is whenever he teaches them how to pray, he says, "Give us this day our daily bread," and that one -- really, that instruction to pray that prayer in 21st century United States of America is so hard to ingest because it's "Give us this day our third refrigerator so that in case the first two go out, I'll have a backup for my backup, that I have enough food." We've really missed that daily need, and identifying the daily needs, I think, helps us to work on our generosity in a way that is felt perhaps more than it's seen.

WES: Yeah, absolutely, so good, everything that y'all said. I want to go back to something that both of you said that made me think about the story that prompted the parable of the Good Samaritan. Of course, the Good Samaritan is this story

that even secular people are aware of, a phrase we even use a lot, "being a Good Samaritan," but that story that prompted it, the question of who's my neighbor and the motivation behind the question of trying to justify himself, that when you're told to love your neighbor and then you ask this attempting -- this question to try to attempt to justify yourself by asking, "Well, who is my neighbor," this attempt to limit who am I obligated to help, who am I obligated to serve, and I love that idea of being very liberal. And, you know, that could mean a lot of things because so often we do restrict ourselves and restrict one another, not just who we are obligated to help, but even who we can help or how we can help.

But I love, Brandon, what you were saying about the liberality, the freedom in Christ to be able to help anybody, help everyone, and how -- Chase, going back to your idea, that if we really did live with a contentment with simply food and clothing, and with these I'll be content, and with our daily bread, and then having the surplus to be able to share with anyone who's in need, and these Biblical principles that are throughout, that everyone -- you should be a neighbor to everyone. You should be a neighbor to -- if you're a Samaritan, you should be a neighbor to the Jewish person. You should be a neighbor to your enemy. You should be a neighbor to people who hate you. You should be a neighbor to people who are ethnically different than you, that speak a different language than you, that come from a different culture than you. You should be neighborly towards everyone, and you should have this freedom to use whatever you have, and whatever opportunity you have, to do good to everyone.

So I think y'all are exactly right, that these are these Biblical principles that run throughout scripture, and so I think that as we approach a passage that sort of gets thrown out as sort of a trump card or as a way of saying, "Well, I don't have

to help these people," "I don't have to do this," or even, "I shouldn't do this," or, "No one should help these people," I think that we should approach this with some caution, and I think that these other passages and ideas should really help to shape our thinking even before we get to that passage.

But let's get a little closer, kind of circle around the passage and talk about the church at Thessalonica. How would y'all orient someone to the church at Thessalonica and what's kind of going on there? What is prompting these letters that Paul has written? What would you want somebody to know about that church before you really got to the passage we're talking about?

Chase, maybe we'll start with you.

CHASE: I think one of the first things that's important to note about the church, I believe, they're primarily Gentile converts, a lot of diversity probably in that group, and they were going through some pretty severe persecution. And keeping that in mind, when you really just start into the book, if you look at chapter -- really, if you start in the first letter, you see a lot of that introductory kind of thing, too, the actual people he's talking to, and one of the things that he seems to repeat a lot is his gratitude for this group of people. And so they were people that participated in persecution -- well, in receiving persecution with him, and they were, as far as I can read, thinking Jesus could come back at any moment. I mean, there is a strong language, I think throughout both letters, of he's coming soon and something's going to happen.

And so when you kind of identify their present day, I guess, for them and meeting their needs, the temporary -- the physical kind of things they were going through, it was very much day-to-day instead of thinking 30 years into the future. How do we help somebody plan for that? It's like how do we plan for right here,

right now? And kind of go back just a little bit to the way that justice was practiced whenever Jesus was -- you know, don't practice your justice before men, the idea of equality, and that's something that I really kind of saw through I and II Thessalonians, was we think of righteousness, and that word "righteousness" is justice. And so when we get into that as we move into the second letter, chapter 3, and we think about what does justice and equality look like from a benevolent standpoint, it changes the way, I think, we help people, the way they would have thought to help people, because there was a big problem that Jesus addressed and that Paul is addressing with the wealthy looking down on others. Most of the time, people doing the persecuting, I think, were people that thought themselves better than others; otherwise, I don't think they would have been doing it, and I think that comes on a spiritual level and a physical level. You don't read of poor people really persecuting others, so to speak. There was a monetary -- a physical difference between the two that was also enhanced, I think, by their own self-righteousness spiritually.

WES: Interesting. Thank you. Brandon?

BRANDON: One of the blessings we have about this letter is it's one of the handful that we have the historical record of the establishment of it in Acts, which can color in some context about what's the bigger picture that's happening. I know that it's so easy to dial in on one scripture, one chapter, one verse, and look at that and build a whole theology out of it or a whole position or take out of it that, in light of the full context, it might not make as much sense, and I think that's something that sometimes happens here with this passage.

Back in Acts 17, especially verses 6 and 7, you know, there's a real problem that they're dealing with. They are under the microscope by the

authorities and officials and the community at large of unbelievers. The accusation has been made that these men are troublemakers who have been going around from city to city causing trouble. Now they're here, and what they're telling people is, "You don't have to listen to Caesar. You can disregard the decrees of Caesar," and that's when the riot basically begins. It's hard to pin down exactly how long Paul was there, but he could have been there -- I'm not saying he was, but he could have been there as little as two weeks. We know he was there for three Sabbath days. Now, that doesn't mean he couldn't have been there for longer, but we know that. So theoretically, he could have arrived just before Sabbath and had to leave town to go to Berea just after the third Sabbath. That's a two-week window. So something that definitely needs to be a part of the conversation is Paul was not there, likely, very long at all. He didn't have much time to influence, to teach, to train, prepare, etc., these new, young believers, so that's something that's going to be in Paul's mind, as well: "I didn't have much time with these people."

The second thing is the accusations that were being made that led to Paul having to leave so quickly. And I think one thing to think about is, this group of people are already under a microscope of "They're not like us. They're troublemakers. They're problematic. We better keep an eye on them. What are they up to?" So you add in to that, then, what he's going to address in his second letter, in chapter 3, of conduct, basically, of people who are wearing the name of Jesus and how you really need to -- you know, we would say it like this, maybe: Dot every i and cross every t in how you conduct yourself because the world is watching closely and we're going to be judged heavily based on everything that somebody wearing the name of Jesus in Thessalonica is doing. So I would orient somebody toward keep all of that in the back of your mind as you're reading these

letters because that's certainly going to play a big part in it, I think, in the message that he's trying to convey.

WES: Yeah. Oh, man, so many good things that y'all both have brought up. And I would encourage people that if they really want to -- again, so that we don't misuse scripture, we should always understand the context, but sometimes it's very difficult to understand all the context on a certain passage. This one is fairly easy in some ways, in that -- read Acts 17, get the context of what was it like when Paul went to Thessalonica, what was it like when he got driven out of Thessalonica, what did he deal with there. And as you said, Brandon, he wasn't there very long at all, and so he had to abandon this brand-new community of Jesus followers and leave them where they're really still infants in their faith and really was terrified that they were going to fall away. He was terrified what was going to happen under persecution. If he got driven out, how were they going to fair under this persecution? And so once he gets word back, he's overwhelmed that they are continuing to be faithful. But, yeah, I think read Acts 17 and then sit down and read I and II Thessalonians. These aren't long letters. They're fairly short letters, and of course that's one of my soapboxes, is just sit down and read it from beginning to end and just kind of get the train of thought.

And I think you both have brought up some really good points, especially the idea of justice and fairness, taking care of one another. That is always supposed to be a part of living in the Christian community. From the very beginning of the church, we see in Acts 2 this idea of sharing everything, having all things in common. Not to the extent that -- I don't think -- I don't even think that in Acts 2 it necessarily means no one owned anything, but that when they owned something, they were willing to hold it in common and consider it common; sell it

so that they could give that money to the church or give that money to the individuals who needed it so that there weren't -- there wasn't need in the church. They took care of one another's need. There was fairness. There was justice. There was righteousness going on. And then, to keep in mind what you were saying, Brandon, that idea of the community -- the unbelieving community watching them and the need to be aboveboard, be the people that Jesus is calling you to be in order to not give a bad reputation to the church, in order to not bring about more persecution.

So with those kind of things in mind, as we sort of zero in on this passage itself in II Thessalonians 3, what do y'all feel -- there's actually an interesting disagreement amongst commentators, and based on what both of you have said, it sounds like maybe we'll get a good perspective maybe on both sides of this question -- or this answer. Some people feel like what's going on here is there's people that think that the return of Jesus is so imminent, that working is kind of pointless. And other people feel like, well, that's probably not really the issue. The issue -- they've got some eschatological questions going on, but they've also got some just idleness and laziness going on within the church.

So kind of what take do y'all take? Or maybe not even one of those two options. But, Brandon, how do you read what Paul is saying in II Thessalonians 3 here?

BRANDON: Well, I'll tell you what. If you had asked me this question a while back, I would have leaned heavily on the, you know, there's some misconceptions about the second coming of Christ, that it is so imminent that -- a way a friend of mine once said it, he said, "Why plant a garden when you're not going to be around to eat the harvest?" And that kind of is how I approached it, I think, for a long

time. But, you know, like what you mentioned, sometime just sit down and read everything straight through. You know, one thing that -- I think I actually even got that suggestion from you a long time ago, to read a letter, or any part of the Bible, just remove the chapter -- you can go online and get it without chapter and verse divisions and just read it. Read the story. Read the letter in its entirety. And it's amazing how many things that you jump over when there's chapter and verse divisions because you're getting to that one verse and rereading it like that.

I think it's fair to assume that maybe there was some of that at play. I don't think that's, like, abusing the text, but I also do think it's a little bit of us reading into it motives. We're going, hey, okay, I can see how somebody thought Jesus is coming back maybe tomorrow or the next day for certain. Who cares? Why go out and work? So yeah, I think that's fair. However, some of the language that Paul uses, that you touched on, is way more pointed than that. It seems that he's addressing something specific that is causing problems. Namely, that -- not that just people are not busy, but that they are busybodies, that their idleness is leading to them causing trouble. So it's not just like, "I don't want to work; I'm lazy," and it's not just, "Oh, Jesus is coming back any day now, so why bother?" We even have kind of a little expression in our own culture, you know, "An idle mind is the devil's workshop." I think this is kind of maybe a picture of that. I don't know where that term or that phrase originates, but I wonder if this is some of kind of what Paul is getting at, is this idleness is prompting people to be worrying about things that they shouldn't be worrying about while ignoring and neglecting things that should be a priority.

And I know Paul hasn't written the Ephesian letter, you know, or the Colossian letter at this point. I know that. But I also know that one of the things

that was part of Paul's theology about work is that work is not just for you being able to eat. He says, you know, that we should work that we may have to give to those who are in need, that work is not simply -- I mean, of course, yes -- I mean, just to use this phrase, "If a man won't work, he shouldn't eat," work, yes, certainly is a part of us being able to provide and take care of ourselves and our family, but there's another component, again, that goes back to that doing good to all men, going about doing good, you know, that a part of our work is also that we would be able to provide for people who, for a variety of reasons, can't provide for themselves.

So rather than being idle and being busybodies here, divisive, causing trouble, if they were taking care of themselves, then they could also be taking care of other people, as well. So instead of being a burden, they could relieve burdens. They could bear one another's burdens, to steal from Galatians again. So I really think that that's something that can't be forgotten in this. I'm not opposed to the -- you know, the eschatology question and all that, but I think that this definitely needs to kind of be a baseline in remembering that this was about disruption, not just sitting around twiddling your thumbs.

WES: Interesting, yeah. Thank you. Chase?

CHASE: Yeah. In chapter 3, he seems to almost be evangelistically focused, and I think that's part of the meat in why we live the way we live. And the way Brandon described that, especially the latter part that he was talking about, it's not just about eating, but eating is kind of the source of life. And so if you don't work, it's almost like -- even the word "eat" there is translated as "live" in other places. And so if he doesn't work, he shouldn't live. Like he can't provide because he's not working there.

But something that, as I read through this earlier today that struck me was how much he identifies the evil one's role in all of this, and it kind of took me back to Jesus -- again, his example prayer. One of the things we rarely hear in public prayers is "Keep us from the evil one and keep us from temptation." And he asks right there, in verse 2, he says, "that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not all have faith, but the Lord is faithful. He will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one." And so there was a component there of wickedness and the evil one that was coming into their idea of being idle and lazy that we perceive to be bad.

And so I think the way that we live -- one of the things that I meant to mention in the -- kind of orienting people into the idea of benevolence is I try to always err on the side of generosity, and I think that's something my parents taught me to do. I would rather be taken advantage of and be seen as generous to people instead of being a detective into what people genuinely need, because their perception is their reality. My perception is not their reality; my perception is my reality, and so trying to figure out when do people have genuine needs -- if I'm willing to work, I'm able not just to provide for my own, but to provide for others who may not be able to provide for themselves, like Brandon said.

WES: Yeah. Great thoughts. Sorry, Brother, what did you say?

BRANDON: I said amen to that.

WES: Yeah, absolutely.

BRANDON: Erring on the side of generosity and mercy.

WES: Yeah, for sure. And I think -- we're going to take a break here in just a second, but I wanted to end this first section by reading from the first letter that Paul wrote, I Thessalonians 4:11. He says, "Aspire to live quietly, to mind your

own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one." And I think that really -- I think that idea sort of sheds light on, is sort of a commentary on, a lot of what we've been talking about, about working hard, and not only for your own sake, but for the sake of others, that you can care for them, but also for the sake of those who are watching because we are living in front of outsiders, and our testimony and our credibility is on the line with what we do and what we don't do.

Guys, these have been some great thoughts. We're going to take a quick break and we'll be right back.

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WES: Welcome back. We had a short break, but we're going to continue our conversation about II Thessalonians 3:10. Let's get real. We haven't really gotten to the verse itself, so let me read it for us. It says, "For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him

not eat." So let's kind of talk about -- what does that mean? What does Paul mean by saying that? Chase, we'll start with you on this one.

CHASE: I think it's interesting that he says "command" not "suggestion," so it's pretty direct that this is not optional. This is a command that he's referenced a couple of times, that this was a command, this is something that's important. And the word "anyone" there is almost the first thing that jumps off the page at me. If anyone -- this is not if any man, if any woman, if -- and I don't know how direct he was being to the general public there when he said that, but the idea there that if anybody is not willing to work -- and I think that would imply people that are able to work. Kind of like we discussed previously, not everybody is able to work. There are people that, even in their context, orphans, widows, foreigners -- and same today; a lot of that same people groups are not able to work, and so I think they're not included in the conversation. I think this is even more strict to people that not only have ample opportunity to work but have opportunity to provide so much more than we need, and I think there was certainly a group of people there, as well. But just the general idea that if anybody is not willing to work, then the result is they shouldn't eat.

And I almost think we can overcomplicate that the more that we read it, but it seems to me to be pretty straightforward. There was an obligation of people that if you were able to work, you work. And he doesn't imply whether that's ministry or whether that's carpentry, or whatever that is. And I think as God has given everybody talent then and now, we have opportunity to work. We work so that we can provide, and not just for ourselves, but also for those -- for others.

I really wish Brandon had been here last week for Galatians because he's mentioned it twice now, and his contribution to that conversation in chapter 6,

especially there about as we have opportunity to do good to all people and especially those of the household of faith, we ought to take advantage of doing that, and I think that kind of goes right in here to this conversation, as well.

WES: Yeah. Brandon, what would you add to that?

BRANDON: Chase, I've been teaching the book of Galatians on Wednesday morning for the last five months, so it's kind of like just stuck in my brain floating around right now.

Well, one thing that I came across that I thought was interesting in preparing for this that had never been introduced before, a fellow by the name of James Grant suggested that Paul's reference here is actually a tieback to Genesis 3, and that humans were created in this garden paradise, you know, with access to everything that was needed, and yet there was a directive that humans were to work, that they were to tend the garden, care for, kind of like a park ranger, perhaps, maybe you think of. But that there was a responsibility there of -- God certainly provided a fruitful land in which to labor, but that there was -- God didn't just create humans to sit under a tree and go, "Boy, isn't this paradise beautiful?" It was humans were being invited to be coworkers with God, asked to participate with what he was doing.

Now, in Genesis 3, the rebellion against the will and wisdom of God came with some consequences, one of those being that this work was now going to be toilsome, tedious, difficult, perhaps less pleasurable, maybe even less easy and more of a battle, and so there were going to be thorns, there were going to be thistles, weeds, things that would be working against this work that you were partnering with God to do, and -- but, anyway, Mr. Grant's suggestion was that man was created to work, and the result was bread, was food. And by walking

disorderly, that Paul is suggesting to them that they're upsetting the work of God in restoring his creation that he's doing through the church, that God -- of course God is working on his own, but God is certainly working through his son Jesus in his church, in his creation, to restore things to what they were intended to be before human rebellion caused so many problems, and so that Paul may even be tying back to that idea of you are -- you're going against the nature of what God created humans to do, which is to be co-laborers with him in his creation, in the expanse of his creation, and that that's why this is so important.

Now, I would couple that with what we said earlier. All of the officials, and now a lot of the people in Thessalonica, are going to be watching very carefully. What harm is it going to do to what God is trying to accomplish, and through Paul, in the Roman world if the reputation that they have is of people who are depending on others to take care of them? Whether you want to take the position of being lazy or if you want to take the position of they're expecting Jesus to come back any minute, from the outsider's perspective, all they see is, yeah, these people are not contributing to the good of society as a whole. They are a burden on society as a whole. This is what these Jesus people are. They're just like their master was. You know, he was a troublemaker. He was a revolutionary. He was upsetting the system, and he got killed because of it. And you can see how it could very quickly snowball into really derailing the work that Paul was doing -- that God was doing through Paul in the church there. So I think that's something that definitely needs to be -- you know, that we want to keep in mind, is there's a bigger picture.

I think, like what Chase was referencing a moment ago, Paul is talking about something specific. He's brought it up too many times and referenced

himself as being an example and how we set this example when we were with you. There's a specific issue at play here that Paul is really fighting with, but Paul also has a bigger view that this problem, when not dealt with, can create a much bigger problem, that the ramifications could be far more significant than just one person not pulling their weight and being a burden to everybody else. That is true, but there's also something bigger that is true, and I thought that was an interesting tie-in that really gave me some stuff to think about and chew on.

WES: That's really rich. I would have never thought about putting that in terms of the creation. My mind started going into a million different directions when you said that because I think that's a fascinating way to think about it, because on the one hand, prior to the creation, the world is *tohu va-vohu*. It's formless and void. It's chaotic. And every time the presence of God and the people of God are removed from a place, then it descends into chaos again, and that really is what Jesus and the Spirit are bringing to the world: the rule and the reign of God. The kingdom of God is bringing order and putting things right.

Going back to what Chase said earlier about justice, that's what justice is. It's setting things right. And when we work with God, when we participate with God in that work -- sometimes it's a matter of cooking food or helping your neighbor move or doing carpentry work, or whatever -- even seemingly menial tasks that we're doing, when we do it in and with the Spirit of God, we are doing it in such a way that it is driving out chaos and it's bringing order to the world. But when we do not do the work that God has prepared for us to do, when we don't do those good works and serve and do and work and we're unwilling to participate in that, then we allow the world around us to descend into chaos.

It also made me think about sort of the exile ethic. As you were talking

about, Brandon, it reminded me of Jeremiah 29, the letter that Jeremiah writes to the exiles. And they're living in Babylon, and it would have been really easy to just say, "Hey, you're exiles here. Just do as little work as you possibly can. After all, you don't want to help Babylonians. Don't help Babylonians. They're not you. They're not your people. Just drag your feet as much as you can. Just be lazy and make them regret taking you from your homeland," but he doesn't. He says, "Work hard. Plant vineyards. Build houses. Give your children in marriage. Seek the welfare of the city." And Peter borrows on that same type of language when he writes his letter of I Peter, talking to Christians who are now living as exiles in the world.

And I love that we keep coming back to this idea that we are living our lives before outsiders, and they should be able to look at us and say, "Hey, I don't know about some of that weird stuff they believe about this Jesus character, but they are living good lives. They take care of their business. They bring order to the world. They are good citizens. They help their neighbors. They're not having to mooch off of anyone else. They're taking care of other people." And so the language that Paul uses here in chapter 3 is very -- I mean, it's kind of harsh. You know, we don't like to get real harsh these days, and this language is really harsh. I mean, it's "Have nothing to do with them." Essentially, shame them. Publicly shame these people that are unwilling -- able, but unwilling to work.

So what application does a passage like this have in the modern church? How do we take a passage like this, and what place does it have in the church today? What would you say about that, Brandon?

BRANDON: Well, let me preface it with this: Obviously, I believe that what scripture teaches applies for everybody. Now, that being said, that doesn't mean

that sometimes there aren't things in scripture that are written specifically to people who have already pledged allegiance to Jesus as their king. This is one of those situations. Now, is there a general principle here that applies to everybody about if a man doesn't work, he shouldn't eat? Certainly. I wouldn't dispute that because I do think there is legitimacy to it. However, Paul is talking to God's people. If I see, you know, somebody else's kid misbehaving, I'm not saying that I wouldn't intervene in any way, you know, especially if they were doing real harm to themselves or somebody else, or property or whatever, but I also am probably not going to intervene in the same way I would with my own children.

You know, in other words, I'm tending to my house, and I feel that there's a tremendous responsibility to do that, and I see that as kind of a situation here, is Paul is addressing the people wearing the name of Jesus because of everything that is at stake, and I don't think it's wise to expect people who are in spiritual darkness to live as children of light. The world is the world for a reason. It has not pledged its allegiance to Jesus. To borrow his language in John 3, it dwells in darkness and may even hate the light. It would be naive, I think, to expect those who do not dedicate their lives to Jesus to live out -- I mean, those of us who do wear his name realize that we oftentimes struggle and fail to live out the ethics of Jesus perfectly, so, yeah, there's going to be some distinction there. So I'm never surprised when the world acts like the world. But Paul -- I think Paul is -- again, he's -- it's like a lawyer maybe talking to his client and saying, "Listen. You're about to go before the judge. You need to wear a suit and tie. You need to comb your hair. You need to say 'yes, sir' or 'no, ma'am.' You need to be respectful and polite. You are under a microscope. This is the time to be on your best behavior." How much more is that the case when you're not just being under the microscope by your community,

but you're representing Jesus to your community and they know it?

It's probably not as much like it was today. I think there was a much clearer line of demarcation between people who wore the name of Jesus and people who did not in the first century. That line -- those lines get a little more blurred today. I think most people consider themselves Christians no matter what, just by virtue of -- at least where I am in the South. You know, there may be no aspect of their lives that bears any of the fruit of that, but if you ask them, "Are you a Christian," they go, "Oh, yeah, I believe in Jesus." I don't think it was quite that blurry in the first century, so there was a very clear "us" and "them," and the "us" had better be making sure that we're living out the teachings of Jesus because they are watching, and if they are going to persecute us, let it be because we're faithful to the way of Jesus and the world may hate that. Don't let it be -- you referenced Peter a minute ago. Don't let it be because of our bad behavior. There's no glory in being punished when you've behaved badly. And so I think he's dealing with a specific -- and I think we should keep that in mind so that we don't wind up weaponizing this verse against any and everybody as an excuse not to do good and help people.

WES: Yeah, great point. Chase?

CHASE: I made a very short list with a line in the middle in looking at how we would do well to apply this particular verse as we operate as a church. And I think every church is going to be different in some capacity, and bigger churches are going to have a different operating system than smaller churches, and you even have house churches in some ways that are going to operate completely differently. And I think one of Paul's intents in this book is for the way that people live to create opportunity for evangelism. Sharing Jesus with other people is kind of the

goal through working, and not working so that we can eat, although that's going to be one of the results, kind of like you guys mentioned even back to the Garden; you work and there's bread. And so, for today, I think there's some positive things we can do for when people fall on hard times, and one of those things has to be communication amongst the church, as a whole, to figure out what are people's giftings, how can people work that they may not see in their own lives, so that if they fall on a time where they need help, how can we help them, maybe not even just with a meal, but how can we help them more, not today, but also for next week, in a way to where we put them in a position to help others, not just themselves, as we're helping them.

One of the things I've seen locally is we've helped a lot of people in the Spanish-speaking community here who have turned around and helped a lot of other people, and these are the poor helping the poor. It's the most beautiful thing, as far as when I look at justice and equality, is when poor people are helping poor people. I mean, it almost breaks your heart like when you see the videos of somebody that's homeless getting a pizza and going around a corner and sharing that with like 14 other homeless people, you know? But they get it so much more, I think, than we do sometimes on a tangible level, and so I think that's one of the things we can do to help operate.

But on the other side of that is I think we have to do a better job of not tolerating laziness, and that goes back to -- the positive thing is we have to learn to help people and not giving up on people. I think the way Paul kind of concludes the verse was don't do this to condemn them, but do this to help a brother, and I think that's the end goal of kind of building the church up so that everybody can work and everybody can eat and everybody can help others, and that's the

reputation I think both of you guys have alluded to. The church needs to be known as generous, contributing members of each other and of society.

BRANDON: Wes, can I play off of something Chase said? He -- well, you just really unlocked a door in my mind. You made me think of so many things with something that you just referenced with talking about the Spanish ministry. My mother-in-law, when she was living, lived in and managed a low-income housing project, and I never got tired or never stopped being amazed at the generosity that I saw within the people living in that community on that property, whether it was taking care of each other's kids, paying bills for each other, feeding each other, I mean, literally just sharing their lives. And there was a mentality that I picked up on of we're all in this together. We sink or we float together. There's no option, so we better be on one another's side in helping each other or we're not going to make it.

And where I live in the Muscle Shoals area, in the downtown area there's a coffee shop, and there's a fellow by the name of Larry who lives -- who sleeps outside of the coffee shop every night year-round. And I've been in that shop many, many times, and the owners and the employees and the customers -- everybody is so good about buying stuff for Larry. And I've watched Larry. I've watched people buy things for Larry that he then immediately turned around, went outside and gave to another homeless guy who lives downtown. I mean immediately. Like they gave him some, like, really good pairs of winter socks as it was getting cold. He pulled them out and looked at them. He took two pair and put them in his pocket, and then he took the other pair and found a guy down the street and gave them to. And I just thought to myself when I saw that, "If that's not Jesus, I don't know what is."

You know, that -- I mean -- and so I brought that back to our congregation of that's where we have to start in this conversation of benevolence, is, first off, we've got to look at one another as we're all sharing our lives together, and if we're going to make it, it's going to be because we make it together. We can't let anybody drop off or fall behind, and until we can do that, I think we're really going to be predisposed to not worry about the "all men." We've got to focus on the household of faith and doing that ourselves, and then it'll naturally spill out into doing good unto all men, as well. So one of the things I think maybe -- and I'll wrap it up on this thought -- is that when we do benevolence, that it's not shortsighted. We should always meet a need that is immediate, but always be thinking bigger of not just meeting a need, but building a relationship, because I don't want my -- I don't want my benevolent work to become just propaganda for evangelism. It's almost like, you know, we're helping you because we want something from you. No, we're helping you because you're a fellow human being made in the image of God whom we love, that we know that God loves. He's poured out so much goodness on us through so many people, we want that to flow out of us onto other people. We want to build a relationship. Regardless of what you do or don't do or where this leads, we want to build a relationship with you because you are part of us. And I don't know; just what you said, Chase, it really hit me. You know, I've seen that myself many times, and it's something that I want to make sure that I cultivate in me. I want to make sure that's in me, too, and so thank you for bringing that up.

WES: Those are such great points and such great stories. Thank y'all for sharing those because I think it all illustrates the fact that -- what Paul is describing here and I think what the church is supposed to be, is -- in some ways, the church is

supposed to be a volunteer organization where we are constantly recruiting people to participate in this mission that we're on. So often, I feel like in our modern world the church has become so consumeristic, where we sort of are like a business that's offering a consumer good for the community to come in, consume what we have to offer, and then go home, whereas Paul is describing a community where everybody is expected to participate. And you don't have to be rich; you don't have to be smart; you don't have to be talented; you don't have to be honored; you don't have to have any of the things that people describe or look up on, but it's things like y'all were describing. I mean, people who themselves are poor, people who themselves are homeless, saying, "Hey, come participate with us. Share with us not only in receiving, but in giving and helping and working," and it gives people purpose and meaning and allows us to participate in the Spirit with what God is doing in the world, and we want that, not from people, but we want that for people. We want that for them, that it is good for them to be a part of what Jesus is doing, and that the only thing we won't tolerate is we won't tolerate those who want to come and consume without participating.

And I think that's the kind of thing that they had going on in Thessalonica. You had people that were just sort of peripheral and they were interrupting what was going on. They were being busybodies, as Brandon said earlier, and they weren't participating in this mutual, self-giving, reciprocal type of love that was supposed to be commonplace in the church. So thank you all -- thank you both for all of those stories.

Let's kind of shift gears just a little bit before we close and talk about, for a second, how is this passage misused? Again, we've sort of alluded to the idea that we can take things out of context and use it to manipulate or to harm others.

So what would you say as far as how have you seen this passage misused, and how do we need to be careful here? Chase, let's start with you on that one.

CHASE: I'd say the primary way is -- here in the U.S., I'll just -- specific where we are, there's a lot of panhandlers, people on the road, and I think that's the primary almost target when we take this verse out of its context and say, "That person's holding up a sign; they should be working. Why would I feed them if they're not willing to work?" And I really think that's a poor use, because are we stopping to help them find a job? And I think, to what you were saying just previous, is the idea behind helping people is a relationship. It's not writing a check, although sometimes that's necessary on the front end or maybe throughout the process. But if our goal is to build a relationship, it's judgment, it's really, in some ways, condemnation to the beggar on the street who's holding up the sign. And they could very well be a fraud, but I would say the majority of us see only fraud, never see a need, and there are genuine people who -- they're starving, and so, well, if they don't work, they don't eat. Well, the foreigner in the U.S. has a really hard time working because guess what? They may get sent back to a dangerous place for not working and they've escaped here. And I think when Jesus talks about justice for the -- even going all the way back to the Hebrew scriptures, the orphan, the widow, and the foreigner, those were your three primary targets for benevolence, and the weightier matters that he references, and even with the woes to the Pharisees in Matthew 23, there's some strain there on helping people.

And then, at the same time, I think we have to use wisdom, too. It's not throw a \$20 bill at somebody and I've done my good deed. It's about not a random act of kindness, but how do I build a relationship? And so I think the misuse of -- our judgment of people based on their appearance instead of trying to develop a

relationship with somebody to actually help them is where we've misused the passage. If that's the kind of person that's not willing to work so they can eat, I don't want a relationship with that person because Paul's pretty specific here in I and II Thessalonians about the way people were viewed that didn't work and what was to be done with them, and so I think we have to be careful in that, just what we see, because not everybody can work. And so when we use this verse to say, "Don't work, don't eat," those that can't are going find themselves in a pretty tough spot.

WES: Yeah, great point. Brandon?

BRANDON: One of the biggest ways that this passage gets misused, I think, or abused, I think, is it can be justification for oversimplifying complex problems. And the reason that sometimes we want to oversimplify things is it allows me to very quickly wash my hands and move on from it free of a conscientious burden of having should have done more, should have gotten involved, and it's easy to just go, "Well, lazy people -- the Bible says lazy people shouldn't eat. You know, they're not willing to work to even feed themselves. It's not my problem."

And to easily, like you said, judge people based upon just an appearance, to look at someone -- there's a great book out there called *When Helping Hurts*, and it's about trying to help people understand. Most people really are compassionate and want to help people who are in difficult situations. Sometimes we just don't know the best way to do it, and sometimes we think the things that we're doing are helpful when they actually may be making things worse. And so there's a lot of education that needs to be on it, and one of the things that I learned in looking into some of that stuff was over half the people who live in homeless shelters actually are employed. I think there's this assumption if you're homeless,

you don't work. Well, certainly that's true for some people, but it's also not true for a lot of people, especially in an economy and during a time of inflation when -- you know, I look at -- in my little, small hometown where I'm from, Pulaski, Tennessee, and I look at the inability for people to find an apartment or a house to rent for less than a thousand dollars a month. I mean, not so long ago a thousand dollars a month would have bought you a very nice home in this area. Some people are working, and they just -- they don't make enough. They're working multiple jobs and they don't make enough.

Then you have to add to that the fact that some of the people on the streets are on the streets for very complicated reasons. Some of it has to do with mental illness; some of it has to do with addictions, and some of it has to do with lack of jobs or job opportunities. And once you get to that level, it's very difficult to get a job without a permanent residence, without an address, without some of the stability that comes with being -- having a place that you live. It's not as easy -- I hear people say all the time, "Everybody's hiring." Yeah, everybody is hiring, but not everybody is hiring a guy who sleeps in front of a coffee shop. And now I mentioned Larry a minute ago. To Larry's credit, when Larry gets up in the morning, after he has his coffee and breakfast that the coffee place provides him, he works his way through downtown Florence with a broom and he sweeps leaves and debris and anything away from all of the businesses' door fronts. In other words, Larry is not a lazy person. Larry has some issues that make it impossible for him to live like most of us do, but Larry's not afraid to work, and the people of that community are not afraid to take care of Larry because of it. So I would caution us from making snap judgments or oversimplifying big problems.

And, Chase, I have to go back to what you said earlier. If I'm going to

err, I want it to be on the side of grace, mercy, compassion, and generosity because I think the Bible is pretty clear that the judgment that I render to others is going to be applied back to me. And James 2 is pretty clear that if we execute judgment without mercy, then we'll receive judgment without mercy. And then he closes that by saying that mercy triumphs over judgment. And so if I'm going to get it wrong, I want to get it wrong doing good to all men, and I think that's something that the Lord would be compassionate about.

Now, that being said, there are times when it is evident that people are abusing, manipulating, taking advantage of, and I think, in the pastoral epistles, Paul even addresses that. Is the church to be a safety net? Absolutely it is. But he also addresses some people who had family that should have also been serving as safety nets and that there were some situations that were being abused there. So there's a balance that has to be done, and it's always easier to just go to -- let me pick on the other side. It's easy to be just so compassionate that you just pour out and do whatever and never question or never look deeper or never say, "Hey, what is your participation in this?" And I don't think that's good, either. I think that's -- Chase has made it clear; Paul was dropping the hammer pretty hard here. So it's not an either/or proposition, as it is the case with so many things. There has to be wisdom. There needs to be discretion.

Now, if I have to choose between am I going to be -- do I think I might be taken advantage of or whatever? I'm going to choose -- you know what? If you're taking advantage of me, that's on you. That's on you. I don't ever want to take a passage like this and weaponize it in such a way that I actually use the scriptures to be less Christlike. That's just not a practice that I want to develop. Have I done it in the past? I sure have. I may do it again in the future, but I really don't want to

develop that practice. And this is one of those passages, I think, it's a low-hanging fruit. If that's what we're looking for is to just make it easier on me, less responsibility, don't have to get my hands dirty, well, then I can grab on to this and really ease my conscience, but is that who I want to be?

WES: What a great thought. Thank you both so very much for your thoughts. I want to close with just one thought to kind of wrap up some of the things that both of you have said about relationships, is that what Paul says here in this passage is that if a person isn't willing to work, don't let them eat, that willingness is not evident on the surface. As Brandon -- as you said, the only way to know if someone is able but not willing, that they're being stubborn, that they're busybodies, that they're idle, that they're all of these things that Paul describes -- the only way to know that is not by looking at somebody; it's by building a relationship with somebody. So you cannot know that about someone until you get to know someone, and so go get to know people. Build relationships with people. Serve people. Help people. Love people. And I love the thought that you had there, Brandon. Don't ever use scripture as an excuse to act in an un-Christlike way.

Brothers, you both are so wise and so Godly, and I love you and I appreciate you so very much being part of our episode today. Thank y'all.

Thank you so much for listening to the Radically Christian Bible study podcast. If you have just a moment, we would love for you to rate and review the podcast on iTunes, or wherever you're listening. It really does help people find this content. I also want to thank the guests who join me each week; Travis Pauley, who edits this podcast; Beth Tabor, who often volunteers her time to transcribe it; and our whole McDermott Road church family, who make it

possible for us to provide this Bible study for you. Now let's go out and love like Jesus.