

Conscientious Cooperators

6 Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. ⁹This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. ¹¹For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. ¹²Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. ¹³Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

14 Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. ¹⁵Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.

You know, there's such a thing as being too religious, isn't there? You can take religion too far, can't you? Last week I was in Nashville for the Festival of Homiletics. I invited our seminarian David Norse down- I wanted to give him a sense of what great preaching there really is out there. So, I was asking him how seminary was going, and of course the first year is always nuts. Seminary isn't like any other kind of graduate program. People aren't just studying theology and church history- they are also studying themselves trying to figure out who they are and who they are going to be. And sometimes this goes more smoothly with some than others. David told me about one guy who is figuring himself out by wanting to pray with everyone. He's like a bursting water main just kind of spewing out his prayers on whoever happens to pass by. And while normally praying for people isn't a bad thing, David told me there was one day this golden retriever approached him while they were in the bathroom telling David he just,

he just want to pray with him right then and there. Now maybe it's just me. Maybe it's just me. But really, I think it's OK in the bathroom NOT to offer prayer. I really do.

Now the guy meant well, said David. He did. It's just he was taking religion just a titch too far. Just a titch. ☺

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Now, this is what a lot of folks think about these idlers, these first century slackers, in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. To understand what's going on here you have to remember that the early church was very much anticipating Christ's imminent return- like they were thinking he was coming back any minute. Jesus seemed to believe this. Paul certainly thought this. As far as we can tell nearly everyone was expecting Jesus to come back within their own lifetimes. And some folks, like the slackers Paul is talking about this morning, some folks were just taking all this too far. They were letting their religion just get out of hand.

See, these folks thought, well, if Jesus is coming back, like on Tuesday or whatever, what's the point of putting on the suit, and fighting the traffic on I-5 to go in and make sure the quarterly reports get done? No, they were so sure Jesus was coming back that they quit their jobs, they took a vacation from their responsibilities, and in lieu of all that they were probably doing exactly what Paul told them to do in the first letter he wrote to the Thessalonians- they were probably just looking up in the sky and praying without ceasing.

But, of course, Jesus wasn't coming back- not then anyway, not in their lifetimes. And pretty soon the extra food they had saved had run out. They burned through their savings, and they cashed out their 401K's. And the only thing keeping them from starving to death was the kindness of friends and family inviting them over for pizza and cheap beer for like the umpteenth time. And this was driving Paul nuts. I mean it's fine to be religious, right? But quitting everything, this was just taking it too far...

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There is such a thing as being too religious. I saw a documentary this week thanks to Dick and Jeni about a man who is still alive everybody used to think took his religion too far. Dick and Jeni told me about a man named Desmond Doss last week, and I'm so glad they did. Doss was born in Lynchburg, VA in 1919. An incredibly religious, spiritual boy, his sister remembers how when they were growing up Desmond would just stare and stare for hours at this print their mother had of the 10 commandments- especially at the picture of the sixth commandment: thou shalt not kill. There was a picture of Cain holding this huge club standing over Abel who was just lying there deader than dead. Desmond says the picture was so horrible he just had to keep looking at it, and he said he knew in the deepest part of him that as a result of seeing this he just would never be able to take life.

And this would have been fine except for the fact that on December 7th, 1941 a day that lives in infamy, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, America went to war, and Desmond, like nearly every young man his age, wanted to join up and serve his country.

Now, he was already working in the shipyards at the time and actually had a deferment- meaning the work he was doing was already supporting the war effort and he did not have to serve. But Desmond loved his country. He loved America. And he wanted to do his part and to serve. Thing is, he just couldn't shoulder a rifle or holster a side arm.

But this didn't stop him. Accepting the label conscientious objector, Desmond joined the army hoping to be assigned as a medic. But, as you can imagine, the army had no idea what to do with this kid. What do you do with someone who wants to enter combat but doesn't want to carry a gun? Everybody carried a gun- there are even stories of chaplains picking up a gun when necessary. In a war zone it could put another soldier's life in danger not to be able to do so. And his fellow comrades didn't appreciate Doss' commitment. At you can imagine at every level Desmond faced ridicule and outright hostility. The other soldiers made fun of him and threw boots at him when he would say prayers at night. Some told him they'd put a bullet through his sorry head if they ever made it into combat together. They just could see no use for someone who refused to carry a gun into a war zone.

And it wasn't just about the guns- he was also raised to strictly keep the Sabbath as well. Being a Seventh Day Adventist his Sabbath was from sun down Friday night to sun down on Saturday, and Doss simply would not work during that time. And you can imagine how this went over. When everyone else was working- he would just be sitting there on his cot reading his Bible. Never mind the fact he always pulled the hardest duty when he did work, this just didn't look good. His commander at the time who was

Jewish said he respected the Sabbath, too- but a war is a war, and sometimes you just have to break a few rules for the greater good. Doss was just taking it all too far.

Well, it no surprise that when people realized Doss wasn't going to leave on his own, something had to be done. And so finally an officer named Jack Glover filed a formal charge against Doss saying he was unfit for service. Glover went to regiment and failed; he went to division and failed; finally, he took it all the way to the top ranking general. It was a personal crusade. When Doss tried to argue his case with Glover telling him he'd go with him to any battlefield anywhere and stay by his side, and Glover spat in his face saying, "You're not gonna BE by my damn side if I can help it!" But in spite of Glover's best efforts to get rid of Doss, it was decided Doss would stay.

But just because they had to put up with Doss didn't mean the other men had to like him. None of them were against being religious within certain limits. Doss was just taking it way too far.

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Of course, not everyone thinks the problem in the Thessalonian church really was about taking faith too far. Not everyone things the problem with these men and women who weren't working was that they were being excessively religious. Some folks say the real problem isn't that they were believing too much or taking their faith too far, but that they were believing the wrong things.

The word Paul uses for Christ's return, his second coming, is incredibly interesting. The word is parousia. And parousia isn't just a church word- parousia is the

word used for whenever an emperor or general visits a city, either to reward it or to settle it. And in the first reading for this morning, when Paul talks about believers being lifted up to meet Jesus who is coming down- the word he's using for Jesus' return is parousia. What's important about this is that when Paul talks about people being lifted up- he's NOT saying that Jesus is swooping down only to pick some up to then leave and fly away to some distant cloud nine somewhere leaving the rest behind. No, it's a parousia, Paul says- Jesus is coming down; all the way down. And yes, people are being lifted up to meet him, but then they'll all come down together and get to the work of healing and restoring and midwifing the kingdom into being as a community.

The problem here is that these Thessalonians don't get that Jesus' parousia, his arrival, isn't like an imperial arrival. When an emperor enters the city he takes over. He takes control. He seizes the city and whatever he says becomes law. But not so with Jesus- people are lifted up to meet with him not to leave, but to come back and participate, to work together and cooperate in the work that needs to be done.

Jesus, to Paul, is coming back certainly not to be served, but also not merely to serve. He's coming back to serve with. He's coming back to serve with. Paul imagines us being lifted up to meet Christ to prepare us to come back down and work together, to cooperate.

And so it's not that our Thessalonian slackers were overly zealous about expecting the parousia, the second coming- it's that they were looking for Jesus to do all the work. They just wanted to sit there, kick their feet up, pray, and think nice, religious

thoughts while Jesus fixes everything. But the reality is Jesus isn't like Ceasar- he's not looking for subjects; he's looking for partners who want to roll up their sleeves.

So it wasn't that those guys were too religious- they just had the wrong idea.

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And it turns out people had the wrong idea about Doss, too. It turns out his faith didn't turn out to be a problem, it didn't put lives in danger- in fact it wound up saving most of their necks. Doss was first sent to Guam where he distinguished himself by tending to soldiers no matter how thick the fire. He went against direct orders and worked at night, knowing it was the most dangerous time but also that it was when his comrades would be most afraid. And in spite of his own fear- he went from hole to hole never carrying a gun or grenade.

Then, after surviving Guam, Doss and his men were sent to Okinawa. Their objective was to take this ridge that overlooked the entire Island. The Japanese would allow them to have it during the day, and then at night, they would overwhelm the Americans and push them off. During one of the worst moments, his unit of 150 men was up on top. And when the Japanese swarmed in, only 55 of the men were able to get off the ridge under their own power. The rest were wounded up there and pinned down. And, when everyone else was going down- Doss stayed up there. Doss was ordered to come down- they told him he couldn't help anyone if he was dead. But he had higher orders. With machine fire as thick as rain with mortar shells ringing down around him, he ran to man, after man, after man. He only weighed about 140 pounds, but he would

drag them back from the fire sometimes two and a time to the safety of the ledge and then lower them down to safety. He said he prayed the entire time saying, “Lord, just help me get one more. Just help me get one more.” Private First Class Desmond Doss stayed up there for 12 hours and saved 75 men that day by himself. And when Jack Glover, the man who worked his tail off to get Doss pushed out, when he found himself cut down and bleeding, who came to him and patched him up but Desmond Doss. Glover today is a changed man- he says he just didn’t understand how Doss could be a patriot and a pacifist. Well he does now.

Doss himself didn’t escape unscathed. When he was helping men pinned down in a foxhole a grenade was tossed in- Doss threw himself on it, having his legs nearly blown off and breaking his arm. He used a broken rifle butt to splint his arm and bandaged his own legs. And then, when they had gotten him out of there and he was lying on a stretcher, he looked over to another man who was in distress. Doss actually rolled off his own stretcher and crawled arm over arm to this man to save his life.

This man who refused to touch a gun, who refused to take life, who was hated at first- became beloved. After his ordeal he was despondent because he had lost his pocket Bible, his only comfort. And when word got back to his unit, do you know every man went out and turned over every rock putting their own lives at risk again until they found it.

And in 1945 Private First Class Desmond Doss was awarded this nation’s highest military honor: the congressional medal of honor. He is, to date, the only conscientious objector to be so awarded. The only thing is Doss himself doesn’t really like this term,

conscientious objector- he says he always wanted to be called a conscientious cooperator, instead. A conscientious cooperator.

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Friends, I will tell you straight up this morning I don't really know what I believe about the Second Coming- I don't really know what I believe when it comes to when or whether Jesus is really coming back. I kinda see this as a mystery above my pay grade. But I'll tell you what I think- if or when Jesus does come back, I think he's going to be looking for a few good conscientious cooperators, people willing to go swim against the stream, people willing to look foolish because they'd rather follow what they believe is right than fit in.

And I'm here to ask you whether you want to enlist, whether you want to sign on for this. The pay's no good. But who knows- the life you save just might be your own.