

TEXT: 2 *Thessalonians* 3:6-15 (Peterson) 10-15 “Don’t you remember the rule we had when we lived with you? “If you don’t work, you don’t eat.” And now we’re getting reports that a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings are taking advantage of you. This must not be tolerated. We command them to get to work immediately – no excuses, no arguments – and earn their own keep. Friends, don’t slack off in doing your duty.

If anyone refuses to obey our clear command written in this letter, don’t let him get by with it. Point out such a person and refuse to subsidize his freeload. Maybe then he’ll think twice. But don’t treat him as an enemy. Sit him down and talk about the problem as someone who cares.”

FREE LOADING CHRISTIANS

Saint Paul was really annoyed. Here he was, a man who had been a prominent scholar, a public prosecutor of sufficient renown that he was chosen to put an end to the Christian problem, a respected and well paid public servant; reduced to trying to make Christians out of a rag-tag assortment of Greeks and Romans and other colonials. Not even Christian leaders in Jerusalem were all that enthusiastic about his mission. He had been run out of towns, put in prison and had been making his living by tent-making. A far cry from his old position! And here he was, working full time for the new Church, not getting any pay from the congregations he was forming, moonlighting to make ends meet and hearing about men not pulling their work weight in the congregation, but being free loading busy-bodies! It seems that Paul was feeling more than a little put upon: His self-sacrifice, intended to set an example of diligence, which he hoped others would follow, was being ignored by too many people willing to sit around on their hands expecting others to take care of them.

I wondered, as I read this, how often I was a Christian free loader? How frequently would Saint Paul’s anger be directed towards me? More often than I would like, I suspect. Now, I know that we are all good Christians, that, after all, is the only kind the Episcopal Church has! But let’s take a look at some of the ways we just might, from time to time, be free loaders.

MONEY: The very first free loading factor that comes to mind is money. We sometimes hate to admit it, but those of us who live and breath in small churches know full well that money is awfully important to the life of the Church. With none to very small endowments, our churches live from Sunday to Sunday, from plate to plate. There are programmatic things that we would like to do that we don’t do because the utilities have to be paid or the insurance has come due! We tend to think that if we listen to the obligatory stewardship sermon and fill out a pledge card, we have met our fiscal responsibilities. And some of us have. But not all of us. Many of us are far from performing the Biblical tithe, let alone matching the widow’s mite! This is a free loading factor that is probably not going to be solved with a flash of revelation and a voice from a burning bush. More likely we will address it incrementally, bit by bit over the years. And, that is alright, at least we acknowledge it and work towards improvement. In order to avoid being money free loaders we need to see the need and to link two words that we have been trained to avoid doing: Money and Church. You can’t have one without the other!

TIME: Money may be the first free loading factor that comes to mind, but an even more precious one is time. Of all of the resources that we have at our disposal (but really at God’s disposal) none is more valued than time. When the preacher in *Ecclesiastes* says that “There’s an opportune time to do things, a right time for everything on the earth”, he was really giving us a plan of action for the

church and for each of us as we live within the church. How central in our lives is the church? For those of us who are retired, it may be relatively easy to make the church central in our gift of time. For younger people with work and family responsibilities the centrality of the church may have to be measured in units other than time. But, with God's help, we may be able to so shape the activity of the church that church-time becomes woven into the everyday fabric of work and family time. Some church members may maintain that what we should really be striving for is quality church time. As one gets older, one begins to appreciate the fact that all time is quality time. If we choose to infuse our time with bitter herbs, that is our problem – it is not a problem of the quality of time – we have the capacity to build quality into every unit of time. A quality life, a quality year, a quality day or maybe just a quality moment. As members of the Body of Christ, we are reminded by Saint Paul not to “sit on our hands” but to seize the time for holy work—and all work can be holy if we make it so.

SPIRIT: Finally, we come to that free loading factor that is the very definition of being a Jesus follower: Spirit. Saint Paul tells us that if we don't work, we don't eat. If we want to be at the saints' banquet, we must not just work, we must color all of our work with the Spirit. Money spent without the spirit may well be money spent on frivolous and unholy things. Time without Spirit may be empty and devoid of meaning. We must work at building spirituality into our lives and churches. It doesn't take a degree in theology to be spiritual. All it takes is intention. Maybe it starts with a few minutes during the day spent in reflection and contemplation. Just thinking about Jesus and what He means and should mean in our lives. Perhaps it is more formal: Organizing and participating in a Bible study, preparing the altar for church service or volunteering for a community service activity. Spirit work may also be very personal: One's prayer activity, putting the spirit of Jesus into our relations with other people, or making time to hear God speaking to us. If we are spiritual free loaders, we put our church community and ourselves in jeopardy. We waste our money and our time.

CONCLUSION: In one sense we are all free loaders – dependent on the grace of God for our salvation and our very existence in any meaningful way. Money, time and spirit are the resources that God has given us. No wonder that Saint Paul grew angry when he saw people wasting those resources through pure laziness. Fortunately for all of us, Paul said “Don't treat the free loader as an enemy. Sit him down and talk about the problem as someone who cares.” Let us do our Christ-work, so that we may be invited by Jesus to eat at the table of the Saints. Amen.