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### **Sermon Transcript: Do Not Be Weary**

Oh. June, you're here. Hey, you're not in section three. You're always in section three, so you threw me off. Ladies and gentlemen, June Cox is here today and this weekend is celebrating her 101st birthday. So I—you know, after all these years, June, I get used to seeing you in one spot, so it—we—but I'm so glad you're here. So welcome. Welcome. What a blessing. And in 99 more years, you get to pick the hymns again, so it's something to look forward to. But we are—we're blessed that you're here. Some of you know I'm part of this improv comedy troupe in St. Louis called ComedySportz St. Louis, and we do performances around. Part of what we do is we do these little mini improv games as part of the show that we do up on stage. We recently learned a new one, and it's called Elimination. The way it works is you've got five players up on the stage, and they're given a suggestion of a location and a situation from the crowd, and then they improvise a scene. That goes on for a while, and after a couple of minutes they, you know, find a natural ending spot and they cut the scene. And then what they do is they go out to the audience and say, "Give me two numbers between one and five." And they'll get the two numbers—like, number two and five. Well, little do they know that before we started the act, each player was given a number. And so when they say two and five, the people who are number two and five leave the stage. And then the remaining three have to redo the scene again, doing all five parts, but just the three of them. And then they do the scene again, and at the end of that they go, "Okay, how about another number that we haven't said yet?" And they'll pick another number out. That person then leaves the stage. Now you're down to two people who have to do all five parts running around, acting with this voice, doing this, whatever funny gestures that were done in the course of the scene. And then eventually they say, "Okay, there's only two numbers left. Pick one of them." They do. That person leaves the stage, and then you have one person left who now is forced to do all five parts of the improv skit by themselves with all the actions, all the voices. And for the audience, it's quite hilarious. But I can tell you from experience, if you're the last one left on stage, it's frightening. You're just trying to remember what was everybody's name in the scene, and what were they doing, and what was this, and what was—you know, what's the important part to—to keep in? It's a—when you're the one left doing all the work, it's not the same experience. And that's exactly the kind of situation that the Thessalonians were encountering and Paul is writing about in his letter to them in this passage. They have a situation where they've all been given parts to play and roles to play in their community.

And some people have left the stage, and now the others are left to pick up all the slack. Meanwhile, those who left the stage—they didn't leave the community. They're still sticking around eating all the food and using up all the resources, because remember, the church back then was very much a communal living kind of situation where they shared all that they had with one another. So—so they would eat from shared food and they would, you know, share resources, and so if others aren't contributing, that just meant that it had to be made up by someone else.

### **Public Policy vs. Insider Ball**

And so that's the context, and I want to get a little bit more into that context with you because this is a Bible passage that has been so terribly abused over the years. There's that one line in there where it says, "Those who don't work should not eat." That seemed kind of hard. Did you hear that? Did anyone—did that get your attention? Yeah. Just so you know, Paul was not trying to write public policy for the government. He was not trying to set up social service programs. He was not talking about all that. What he was talking about was—this is insider ball here. This is in the life of the church. In our community of the church, everybody needs to do their part or they shouldn't get the benefits from it. And the way to express that would be to say, "Then they don't eat," meaning they don't take from what everybody's putting into the middle, into the pile. Before we go too far into that—those harsh, stern words that are in the middle of this passage—let's just kind of get in the context of it, because he's talking about this with the Thessalonians in the second letter. And as he gets to this point, this is the very end of that letter. He begins this portion not with jumping right in with the—the harsh words, but he—he begins with humility, saying, "I need you to pray for me. I—I—I need your prayers." And that's, as the leader that Paul was, that's an act of humility itself, saying, "Look, even I need your support and I need your prayers to God for me, because not everybody has the faith. Not everyone's faithful." And then it gives that line: "But the Lord is faithful." Immediately what he wants to point out to them, and to us now as hearers of this, is to understand this: that all of the ministry and the mission that we do together, and all of the care and the work that we do as the people of God and a family of faith together, while our faithfulness and our efforts are a part of it, it ultimately does not depend upon that. Ultimately, it is the Lord who is faithful. So that even when moments break down, or people break down, or people are less than their best selves, then God is faithful. And that we always rely on that presence of God in our lives as the core of what holds it all together. And then he prays for them and their experience of the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ—the reliable love and kindness and grace of God through Jesus Christ. This is what we have to hold on to together.

### **Fake News and the Right to Reconciliation**

And then he moves on to talking about, "Now look, there's some people that aren't doing what they're supposed to be doing." They had roles to play. And just so you know, what's

been going on at this point is that there are those who have been coming and teaching the Thessalonians that like, "Oh, well, you know, actually Jesus already came back, so it's all over. You missed it." There are people who are opportunistic evangelists who are jumping into their community, giving them false teachings, and kind of messing things up. And some of them have even gotten to the point where they're like, "You know, I just—why bother to work? I mean, if Jesus is going to come back, I'm just going to wait on it." And they actually stopped contributing, stopped working, and supporting the community because they just figured it wasn't needed. So, they were getting confused by these false teachings. There were even people writing letters in Paul's name, sending it to the Thessalonians. So, they already had fake news back then. So it's like coming to them and—and—and they—and as they received that, you know, there was a need to clarify that. That's why you have that weird ending. Did anyone else catch the weird ending? It's like, "I, Paul, am really writing this. It's really me. It's the mark of my hand. You know me. I talk like this." I mean, that's kind of the Rob interpretation of what I heard. You know, there's a lot of like, "It's me, Paul. Really. No, not fooling." And it's—it's a weird thing at the end, but it's because there's been these other communications. And so they're mixed up in the teachings and it's caused these problems. And so you have people not contributing to making the ministry happen, but they're still taking the benefits of being in that community. And one thing I want you to notice is that he says some—I mean, there's some harsh words about, "Don't have anything to do with them." The idea is there should be some type of admonishing of them, some pushback. But it says very clearly: "But don't think of them as enemies." You should not think of these people as your enemies. We're looking to just admonish them. There's always the door open for reconciliation. There's always the door open for them to be brought back into the community. That's what grace does. That's what love does. And you know that because when you get to the end of this passage and Paul goes into the awkward like, "It's me, Paul, you know, I'm really writing this. It's merely me this time," section. Right after that, he says, "But—but I pray for all—all of God's love, all of God's peace to be with all of you. All of you." And it's a very specific word in that original language that was used. He could have very easily said like, "And I wish, you know, the peace of God for all of you who are actually doing what is right, not those who are busy bodying away," but he specifically used the word which meant, "I mean this for all—all of you. That we never cease to wish and work towards peace and grace for all."

### **Messing Up Kids with Grace**

It's important in the life of this church that we all contribute into what we're doing together. It doesn't work unless we all put in little parts to make it happen. Imagine with our Needs Among Us program that we have, with Needs Among Us ministry. Imagine if we put out the list of all the needs and nobody turns anything in and nobody offers to help. It doesn't work. And in addition to all of that, there's all the people who sift through all the stack of papers

and get it entered into fancy spreadsheets and then get together and have meetings and say, "Okay, I'm going to call these people and you're going to call, and we're going to coordinate all this." Like, that takes all these other people to do their part and—and—and join in and be a part of that. It—it—it comes together because—you realize we don't have to do Needs Among Us. We could stop it. It's not required. There's no—it's not in the Book of Order for the Presbyterian Church USA. This is just our little thing here, and it would be so much easier if we just didn't do it. All that work we wouldn't have to do. It would be easier, but it would also be less. And I would say that we would miss out on an opportunity not just to do what is right, which is what he encourages them. He tells them in the midst of his message, Paul says—says, "Don't grow weary in doing what is right." This ministry that we have is—is—is a perfect example of where many people chipping in, being a part of it, not only does a thing that is right, but it teaches us right. It teaches us a—a—a—a practice of loving. Loving even beyond the effort of the other person. What I love so much about the Needs Among Us is that when we present the needs to you, they're all jumbled up. Some of them are the needs of someone who's been in this church for many years and who has poured blood, sweat, and tears into the ministry and the mission that we're doing together, donated money to make this ministry happen. And now they need help. And their—their need is right in there mixed randomly with another one of a family from Breitpoint that has never walked into our church, hasn't done anything to earn grace and love and mercy, because that love of God is intended for all. And it teaches us—it forms—you realize we are messing up a generation of kids in this church. They're going to think it's normal that a church takes care of the needs that people have. What a wonderful way to mess up a kid. I've messed up my kids in a lot of ways. I don't know any of them were that wonderful. I almost got an amen out of Nathan on that one. Think it teaches us what it is to love beyond the efforts of those who are involved, while at the same time calling upon all of us who are inside of this to contribute what we can, how we can. It'd be easier if we didn't, but it'd also be less. And we'd be missing out on the opportunity for something that's right and teaches what is right.

### **The Hard Work of "Welcoming All"**

The welcome statement that you have on the back of your worship handout—first of all, a lot of effort put into doing that. But it takes a lot of effort for you to actually live that statement. That's hard work. Do you know how hard it is to welcome all? Have you seen people? Some—some are difficult. Some are not their best Christian selves. Some of them are weird. I'm—I'm sorry. I looked right at Troy when I said that, too. I—I shouldn't have. Hold up. Sorry. Come here, buddy. Come here. Come here. Come here. Come here. We're good. We're good. We're good. Okay. It just—I just—I—I just went weird. I looked right at him, too. It was just—it was too much. Too much. But there are weird people, right? And they stress the situation. And some people are, all right, even mean, and—and—and—and

it just stresses it. And for—for us to make a commitment—we're going to put it on the website, we're going to put it on the worship handout every week, we're going to live into this—that we're actually going to do the difficult work of welcoming all. It takes effort. It would be easier not to welcome all. It would be so much easier to say, "Let's just get more like us." But then it would be less. And worse than being less, we'd miss out on the opportunity to do what is right, and to teach what is right, and to live into what is right. This goes on to other ministries. Wednesday night ministries here at the church—Wednesday nights when we have all the kids here, right? We don't have to do all that. You know that, right? Do you know how much easier it would be not to do Wednesday nights with having all the ministry for the children and youth? I mean, there's all the food, there's the recreation, there's the—the faith formation that goes on. It would be so much easier just not to. But then it'd be less, and we'd miss out on the opportunity to participate in something that's right and good and teaches and builds up the faith. Because one of the real gifts of a ministry like that is that each one of those children and youth go through the program, even as they're going through it, even if it's not conscious in their minds, what they recognize on some level is that these old people didn't have to be here. And there's only a couple of them that's getting paid. And even the ones getting paid aren't getting paid enough. But they see that and they know that this commitment that the people of God have to love and to teach the faith and share the faith, that's important to us, and it shows in that investment on Wednesday nights. I mean, my goodness, we can just keep going with this. I mean, just think about all the different ministries that take out the participation of the people and see how well it goes. How do you think Mobile Market would go when it's—it's just Judy Stratton out there loading all the cars by herself? Anyone want to imagine that? I know Judy don't. Can you—can you imagine the Summer Sack Lunch program if Nancy got to put all the lunches together and then load them all into her car and deliver them all? The thing is, she would do it, but it'd be so much less. And so many would miss out on the opportunity to participate in what is right. This just keeps going with all the efforts. I mean, our deacons—oh my goodness, our deacons—all the visitation. You realize, you deacons, you really don't have to do all the visitation and outreach that you do. I probably shouldn't say this, but Connie's not in the room. I think I can get away with it. You're amazing deacons. You're super deacons. But you do it that way. You do deaconing that way—you didn't know it was a verb; it is. You deacon that way. And to not would be less, and the world would miss out on a lot of right and good and beautiful stuff—that real love of God, steadfastness of Christ kind of stuff. So many opportunities.

### **Dwayne's Story: The Safety of the Gym**

So yes, we each need to find our part to be in this, because this ministry is doing so much above the minimum requirements here that we need all of the efforts that you put in. The efforts of your time, the efforts of using your talents, the financial giving that you do—it all

comes together by you all participating in the individual ways that you do. It comes together into what ministry and mission God calls for us to do together. And it's far above the minimum. And thanks be to God, because I don't need church to be easy, and I don't want it to be less. But what I do want it to be is right, and good, and grace-filled, and loving. You know, several years ago, there were some kids breaking into our gym. Now, "breaking in" is a very—it's a little bit of a dramatic statement. What happened was they yanked on the door until it opened because the lock wasn't good, okay? They just yanked on it. It opened up. And we have security cameras, so we know exactly what they did. And you know what they did when they got inside of our building? They walked into that gym and they turned on the lights, and then they opened up the doors and got the basketballs out, and then they played basketball for about an hour or two. And then you know what they did then? They neatly put the basketballs back, and closed the door, and turned off all the lights, and then shut the door and they pulled it hard enough that it would lock behind them. Now, there would have been a really easy response to that once we saw that on the videotape. "Well, let's just get a better lock for that door. We could put—if we put chains on it, then you can't just yank it open. How about that?" And that would have been easy. But what happened was, through the efforts of different volunteers and such, a different decision was made. And we said to the kids, "How about instead of breaking in, you just come once a week and we'll have volunteers here." And so now every Tuesday, we have volunteers who come here and open up the facility for them. Sometimes earlier than 4:30, because those kids line up and get here early. I've had a kid come to the door at one o'clock one time, wanting to know if they can get in for basketball. But they open up those doors, those kids come in. There's often drinking water ready for them because it gets hot in that gym. And a safe space is made for them to enjoy that recreation and to enjoy this facility that you all have prepared and made space for. And several years ago, there was a young man named Dwayne who was part of that community, who came here to come into a space that was safe where they could have some fun with others. And he came here and he played basketball and he experienced that. Unfortunately, Dwayne's life went in a direction that led into some bad interactions, and he was shot and killed. But after that moment happened, two things in particular happened in the life of this church. The first of which is that that mother of the young man who died came to the church and asked if they could use our facility for the service, because they have a smaller church and they knew they needed more space for the service. Bob McCammon walked her down the hallway from the gym to come talk with us here at the office, and she felt like this was a space that was good and safe and loving—and Bob, you were part of that witness that day. And so we agreed to host the funeral, which happened yesterday, and that was beautiful and wonderful. The second thing that happened is that Dwayne's little brother, in the midst of this grief, in the midst of all that he's going through, when it came to Tuesday, he told his mom he

wanted to come up and play basketball here. Because dealing with the loss of his brother and the pain of that was just too much. But that kid saw that gymnasium as a safe place—as a place where there was love, and care, and support. And it's because people stepped in and didn't do what was easy. People stepped in and did what was good and loving and, I would say, right. Do not—do not, church, ever grow weary in doing what is right. Because that beautiful creation of God next to you in this church needs you to do what is right, not just what is easy. And because there are children and adults in the community outside the walls of this church that need you to do the work and the contribution and the participation here to make the space and to make the clear witness for what is right. Do not grow weary, because the Lord is faithful and you can count on that through your own witness, your own faith, your own offering. May God be glorified by all that you do that is right.

Hallelujah and amen.