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Title: Contagious

Text: 2 Thessalonians 3:1-18

There's a saying most, if not all of us, have heard. You may have heard your parents repeat it when you were in school and you were finding your way around your social circle. The saying is: Bad company corrupts good character. Do you know where that saying comes from? Not from a fortune cookie. It comes from the Bible. Specifically, 1 Corinthians 15:33. The Apostle Paul said it – *"Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'"* Even though that verse comes from a different letter, it is in many ways the theme of this final chapter of 2 Thessalonians. We're in the last chapter of a series from Thessalonians. We've been talking about how to develop a faith that is as solid as steel – a faith that can withstand whatever the world brings our way.

In today's text Paul addresses a problem in the church of Thessalonica. It appears that some in the congregation were living exemplary lives, but there were others among the church members who were not pulling their weight. So, Paul takes them to task. He challenges them all to live a life of character. We've been talking about developing a bulletproof faith. For that to happen, you need to develop a bulletproof character. And let me tell you something about character. It's contagious! Whether your life is given to good character or bad character – it's contagious. Bad company corrupts good character, true. It can also be argued that good company converts bad character. That's why Paul said so many times throughout his letters, "Follow my example. Imitate me. Do what I do. Follow me as I follow Christ." Everyone around is contagious with either a good influence or a bad one. Thus the title of today's message – CONTAGIOUS, because that's what people are. Everyone is a little contagious, and some people are a lot contagious. The quality of your character comes down to whose influence you will allow yourself to catch.

Paul says in today's text that you need to be careful. Be careful what you catch from those around you. Be careful what you pass on. Today I want to talk to you about three things you can do to develop – or rather to catch – bulletproof character. Good character doesn't happen by accident. If you don't specifically choose to move in the direction of good character, you'll almost certainly move in the other direction. So here are the three things you need to do to become solid as steel in the character department.

- 1. Follow the example of INTEGRITY.** Paul says, *"For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example"* (vs. 7). He said that because he had just finished saying... *"...keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us"* (vs. 6). Paul is saying, "You've got good examples to follow and you've got bad examples to follow. Follow the good example – my example. If you are looking for a good example – follow me as I follow Christ." Now when Paul says *"keep away from every brother who is idle,"* he's not talking about the Amish practice of shunning, where you cut off all social contact with a person. In fact, in verse 14 he says that we should not treat these people as enemies, but we're to warn them as brothers. So, when he says *"keep away,"* he's talking about the amount of influence you let that person have in your life. I am friends with some people whose lives aren't really where they should be spiritually. Some are professing Christians who are not walking in obedience right now. Some, as far as I know, have never received Jesus as their Lord and Savior. They're my friends, and I don't reject their friendship, but neither do I let their habits or their worldview influence the way I think and behave. My prayer is that I will be able to influence the way they think and behave. Paul says, "Follow the example of integrity." For everyone you know – every friend, every co-worker, every family member – you will have to decide: What level of influence will I extend to this person? Is this someone whose example I can follow? Or is this someone who desperately needs my good example? Another way to say it is: Will I be this person's student, or will I be this person's teacher? Now, in your best relationships, you will be both. As pastor, I am a teacher, but I am also a student. When I stop being a student, I limit my ability to teach. We might not always be a teacher, BUT we ought always to be a student. Being a leader might be optional, but being a follower is mandatory. But, be selective in who you follow. It will be a case of iron sharpening iron, and one person sharpening another (Proverbs 27:17). You need to be selective with who you let sharpen you. Not everyone sharpens, some make dull. Paul said, *"Follow our example."* In his first letter to the Thessalonians he said, *"You became imitators of us and of the Lord"* (1 Thessalonians 1:6). It might be a good idea to make a list of people you feel comfortable imitating. In other words, make a list of people whose example you would do well to follow. This list might not be so long, but every name on the list should be a person whose life is characterized by integrity and accomplishment. There should be something in

their life that is worth imitating. The way a man leads his family. The way this woman speaks kindly to everyone, even when people are rude to her. The way this person is always on time. The way this person always tells the truth, even when it hurts. The way this person exudes the presence of the Holy Spirit. The way this person can listen without interrupting. And on and on. When you think of a character quality that you need to develop, ask yourself: Who do I know who has this quality? How can I learn it the way they learned it? Consider putting that person on your list. If you want to develop godly character, make the intentional, on-purpose decision to always follow the example of integrity. You'll ALWAYS do well to follow Jesus!

2. Follow the path of RESPONSIBILITY. Paul says, *"We hear some of you are idle. They are not busy; they are busy-bodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat"* (vs. 11-12). Let me tell you the story of a man named Jack. Jack was going through some hard times. He had been out of work for a while. Even though his wife was working, there was a strain on the family finances, and they needed some help. Jack was not exactly living the overcoming life. He wasn't productive at home. His wife would get up in the morning and get their daughter ready for school before she went to work, and then she would come home at night and cook dinner for the family. Jack spent his time playing video games and surfing the internet, under the pretense of looking for work. When his pastor arrived at Jack's house, the first thing he noticed was that the grass was really tall. The garage door was open, and there were piles of clutter. When his pastor went in the house, Jack put his video game on pause so that they could have a conversation. Jack shared all about his situation, how he had sent out dozens of resumes and he was ready to give up hope. He was discouraged and frustrated, and he asked his pastor what he thought he should do. His pastor said, "I will give you my opinion about what you should do, but it's really more than just an opinion. That's because I have been in a similar situation where I was discouraged and frustrated. Even though I didn't spend all day playing video games, I did watch a lot of old movies and ESPN. So I have an idea of what your situation is like. And I know what it takes to work your way out of it." Here's what his pastor suggested: "Go to sleep at night when your wife goes to bed. Don't stay up watching TV or playing on the computer. Get up in the morning when your wife gets up, and spend the day being productive. Unplug your PlayStation and put it in the attic. Mow your yard. Clean your garage. Do the laundry and make sure dinner is on the table when your wife walks in the door. And make sure you do something job-search related every day." Since Jack was a believer, his pastor also said, "I also suggest that you spend one hour each day studying First Timothy. Go to the library (get every commentary they have), and work your way, verse-by-verse through this book." What was this pastor challenging Jack to do? He was challenging him to follow the path of responsibility, to stop being idle. We've all heard the saying, "An idle mind is the devil's playground." You could also say, "An idle life is the devil's playground," because when you are idle and unproductive, you create a lot of room in your life for a wide variety of bad decisions – the opportunity to neglect responsibility, the tendency to do little or nothing. That's why Paul goes on to say, *"And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right"* (vs. 13). What's he saying? He's saying, "Follow the path of responsibility." Here's a good question to ask yourself – especially when you don't really have anything to do. Ask yourself, "What's the most responsible thing I can do right now?" Sometimes the most responsible thing you can do is close your eyes and go to sleep – sometimes it's to get out of bed – sometimes it's to give your undivided attention to your spouse or your child – sometimes it's to read something, learn something, study something, take a class – sometimes it's to reward yourself after a job well done with some uplifting form of entertainment. Get in the habit of asking yourself, "Is what I am about to do the most responsible thing I can do? If not, what is?" Character is not something that you will just accidentally stumble upon. If you're going to get there, you're going to get there on purpose.

3. Follow the practice of ACCOUNTABILITY. Paul was saying to the Thessalonians that there were some among them who were idle and unproductive, then he said... *"when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat'"* (vs. 10). He also said... *"If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother"* (vs. 14-15). There are people in this world who want to live according to their own rules, they want to do things their way without having to answer to anyone – and they still want everything they think they're entitled to. Our culture has very much become a culture of entitlement. As a person of character, this cannot be you. You need people in your life who will hold you accountable for what you say and do. At the same time, as a person of character, you can't let yourself get talked into a situation in which you are carrying someone's load, with no accountability on their part. If you do, it's a disservice to the other person. When we enable someone, we generally remove them from accountability. We need

accountability. We need to have to answer to someone for the decisions that we make. People who have no accountability often fail in the area of responsibility. I've seen it happen many a time – in churches, in businesses, and in families. I've seen churches organized in such a way that the pastor answers to no one. I want you to know – I have a board. I have a presbyter. I have a district superintendent. And here's the big one – I have a WIFE to answer to. Without accountability, it's too easy to fall into the "I'm not going to work but I still want to eat" mentality. People of character don't take that risk. When there are accountability structures in your life, it helps keep you focused and on track. So let me ask you: How accountable are you? Think about your accountability in these areas: **Your work life** – most people have a boss. If you don't, if you're self-employed, do you have someone to answer to? Can you think of how maybe you could be more productive in your work if you set up an accountability structure? **Your personal life** – Are there parts of your personal life that are hidden from everyone? Are you the only one who knows your password, for example? Do you panic when someone asks to borrow your phone, or use your computer? Are you spending money that your spouse doesn't know about? Do you make unilateral decisions without consulting anyone else? Can you think of a way that you could open up levels of accountability in your marriage and home life? **Your spiritual life** – Is there anyone to keep you on your toes? Can you go days without praying or reading the Bible – and no one would ever know? Is there some way you could establish accountability with someone whose spiritual leadership you trust? It's as simple as this. People of character are accountable, and they hold others accountable as well. It's *"iron sharpening iron."*

- 4. Conclusion.** There's a contagious nature to character. In fact, you could say that character must be caught before it can be taught. It means that if you want to become a person of character, you have to make a conscious decision to surround yourself with people of good influence, and you need to protect yourself from those who aren't heading in the right direction. You also want to think about how you're influencing others. You can say it this way: **If you want to develop Godly character, be careful what you catch, and be careful what you pass on.** Look closely at the examples you follow, and the example you set for others. Look closely at your level of responsibility. Are you doing the best you can with what you have? Look closely at your system of accountability. Have you organized your life so that you're not able to get away with anything, so to speak? Have you organized your life so that people of integrity have the right to offer correction? And are you willing to do the same for people who seek your leadership? Character doesn't happen by accident. It's intentional. So...make it your intention to catch the right qualities, and to pass them on to those around you.