

WORK AS CHRISTIAN DUTY

“Seventy-five? You don’t look seventy-five,” the young woman said to Clarence.

They were in the local hardware store. Clarence was helping the woman find the right screw.

“It seems like you enjoy what you do,” she said. “But shouldn’t you be retired?”

“I love what I do,” Clarence said with a smile. “I only work here a few hours a week. Plus I’ll be able to take a little extra money on my church’s mission trip this summer.” Clarence had worked for more than fifty years as a contractor. He was proud of the work he had done. He didn’t cut corners, and he didn’t cheat his customers. He always did quality work. But the steady job had been taxing on his body.

These days, he only did isolated jobs for special friends and family. And he couldn’t wait for a special project coming up in June. Clarence’s church was partnering with a ministry who builds homes in Guatemala. “This is my seventh construction mission,” he shared.

“I guess you don’t have any plans to slow down,” the young lady smiled, pushing her cart down the aisle.

“I’m slowing down a bit,” Clarence said as he chuckled, walking beside her. “As long as God gives me strength, I plan to keep going. And when I can’t travel, God will give me something else.”

1 What kind of work has God called you to do?

2 What sorts of boundaries should we put around our working lives?

3 What do you anticipate are some of the different images and instructions about work in the Bible?

¹⁵ And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

...

⁹ Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work.

...

¹⁷ But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.

⁴ I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.

...

³³ I have coveted no man's silver, or gold, or apparel. ³⁴ Yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me. ³⁵ I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

...

⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

...

¹⁷ In his defense Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working."

⁴ "As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work."

...

³³ I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Created for Service

In the beginning, there was work to be done. In the narrative of the world's creation, even before the introduction of sin, humans are made with a productive capacity and for the purpose of expanding God's ordered creation—tending the primordial garden. The writer of Genesis 2 even anticipates this and calls out the need for someone to bring order to the earth: before humans, "there was no one to work the ground" (Gen. 2:5). God creates humanity from the ground for the purpose of bringing order to the ground.

In one form or another, all work is a continuation of these gardening skills. When Genesis is written, everyone inherits a farming or shepherding lifestyle, growing food and tending the earth directly. But in the modern age, when humans specialize in countless other professions, we still depend on the earth for food.

Even though God created humans to tend the ground, God's favor does not derive from humanity's productive efforts. In Egypt, Israel experienced what it means to be slaves—people valued only for what they can do. But as soon as God frees the Israelites from Egypt, He grants them the gift of Sabbath rest, a weekly reprieve from all work (Ex. 20:9). God loves us, even when we are unproductive.

When the Father sends His Son to show this love, Jesus says that the work of God is not finished (John 5:17). God is carrying out the plan of salvation, bringing order back to creation. God has a plan to deal with sin and death, to ensure that His work is not in vain—that our work can align with what God continues to do. Thus, when Jesus breathes His last and gives His life, He signals the completion with the words, “It is finished” (John 19:30). His work is done.

So what are Christ's followers to do? Are they invited to a life devoid of work, since the great work of redemption is at an end? Far from it! For the kingdom of God is at hand, reversing the fortunes of the weak and powerless. In all things, God's people are to work for the good of others, ensuring that the message of Jesus goes forth unhindered. Jesus spent His labor and His life to serve others, and His followers will do no less. Paul reminds church leaders of Christ's words: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

1 Do you tend to think of work as an imposition or a blessing?

2 What are some ways that we overvalue our own work and let it define us?

3 Where do we see evidence that the work of God is still continuing to this day?

⁶ Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. ⁷ For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; ⁸ Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: ⁹ Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.

¹¹ For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies.

¹² Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread.

⁶ In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. ⁹ We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."

¹¹ We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. ¹² Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat.

Case Study: The Church of Thessalonica

In Acts 20:33–35, we read about Paul's advice for Christians to continue to work on behalf of the weak, giving generously in the same way that Christ spent His time. Probably early in the apostle Paul's ministry, he faced a challenge from the church he had founded in the large city of Thessalonica (see Acts 17:1–9). As we read what Paul says to this church, we hear him correct a misunderstanding of work that is repeated, even to this day.

For one thing, the Thessalonians were confused about the coming day of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:1–2). Since the earthly work of Christ is

complete, and salvation is already at hand, these early Christians were understandably eager to hear news of Christ's return. Some of them—perhaps certain that Christ's return would shortly make their work valueless—had given themselves over to idleness or even quitting their jobs. *If Jesus is about to appear, they thought, why continue to worry about earthly things like money?*

Paul's words against this perspective are sharp and specific. Do not let "idle" and "disruptive" people disrupt the kingdom mission (2 Thess. 3:6). The day of the Lord has not come, nor will Christ's appearance invalidate the efforts of those who continue their work so that they can eat and to use money to live (vv. 8–10). Paul is perfectly willing to say that working in order to eat is natural: it's the continuation of the gardening work that God gave humans.

But Paul and his companions could probably have argued that they were too important, too busy to be troubled to work with their hands. Instead, Paul and his ministry companions were as active at work as anyone else, providing a model for other leaders (vv. 7, 9). Does this mean that Paul would be against pastors earning a salary? Not at all, for in another context he says that ministry workers are worthy of financial support (see 1 Tim. 5:17–18). But Paul uses his own work as an example for this church: no one should spend their days with nothing to do, simply waiting for Christ's return. What kind of example would that be? The work of the kingdom is simply too important, and the work continues.

1 When have you seen people become too concerned with knowing the day when Jesus returns?

2 How does Paul's example of ministry work challenge misconceptions of leadership?

3 When have you been tempted to undervalue your own contributions, to let kingdom work be the responsibility of others?

Set Free from Boredom

There is a particular week each summer when I take a vacation from my job. This isn't an ordinary vacation, however. On this particular week, I join with dozens of other volunteers who give up their time to run a camp that is exclusively for children who have been touched by the foster system. One week a year, these campers arrive to find a group of counselors, leaders, and support staff who create a world with abundant choices, good food, and a safe environment for fun and friendship.

When new volunteers show up each year, the veterans have to remind them that this will be one of the craziest and most fatiguing weeks of their lives. Even for those who have been parents, nothing can prepare someone for the amount of running around and the excitement packed into a single week. I don't think I could ever be as tired as I feel at the end of camp. It is *hard work*.

At the same time, we get the chance to see God working in the lives of the most precious children. For campers who come back, year after year, we might see growth and new confidence rise as they return to a place that so generously displays the love of Christ. But when I come back to the "real world" and to my working routine, it will often take me two weeks to process the experience and to share with my wife everything I witnessed.

We all need rest and respite; we all need times of silence and solitude. But a world without anything to do would leave us empty and cold. God created us to be spiritual beings in action, cultivators of the order of creation, and useful to our church family. Whatever confidence we have in God's good future, we can just as confident that meaningful work is at hand.

1 What kind of activity and hard work leaves you with joy?

2 When have you been challenged to find meaningful work?

3 In God's kingdom, what is the kind of responsibility that you have been given?

Work as unto the Lord

It can be tempting to divide our lives into two categories: sacred and secular. But even before the introduction of sin, God gave humans work to do, so we can rightfully view our work—whether as a professional, a student, a homemaker—as an important part of our greater call to ministry.

Write the following phrase on a sticky note: “Thank You, God, for my work. Help me to honor You in it today.” Place it in a prominent place this week, and pray that short prayer each time you see it.

Key Text

I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.

—Acts 20:35 KJV

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

—Acts 20:35 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of May 11 through May 16

- Mon.** Proverbs 10:1–5, 15–16—Work Diligently Before God.
- Tue.** Matthew 20:1–16—The Workers and Their Wages.
- Wed.** Amos 5:6–15—God Demands Justice for All.
- Thu.** James 5:1–11—Wait Patiently for God’s Justice.
- Fri.** Colossians 3:12–17—Serving with Enthusiasm.
- Sat.** Deuteronomy 24:14–21—Justice for the Worker.

Next Week: Deut. 24:14–21; Eph. 6:5–9; 1 Tim. 6:17–19

We will discuss the economic justice that God wants us to seek in our working lives. Does God bring to mind any person or group who is not paid fairly?