

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

Intro July 8, 2007 Why Work?

Work is brutal. Work is a four-letter word. Most people don't think that work could possibly have anything to do with spirituality.... They assume that these two worlds cannot mesh. But if we bring our souls to work, then we can transform our work. That is when our work can begin to transform us. The problem for most people is that their work transforms them into something bad, something bitter and tired and broken.¹

So said Tim McGuire, former editor of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, speaking at a seminar entitled "Faith, Religion, and Values".

It is well attested that working in corporate America has its downsides. One wag has lampooned the work environment with the following list, ***You Know You Work for An American Corporation When...***

- You sat at the same desk for 4 years and worked for three different companies
- It's dark when you drive to and from work
- You're already late on the assignment you just got
- You work 200 hours for the \$100 bonus check
- Your boss' favorite line: "when you get a few minutes"
- Your boss' second favorite line: "this isn't exactly what we need. It may be what we asked for, but things have changed."
- Your relatives and family describe your job as "works with computers"
- The only reason you recognize your kids and friends is because their pictures are hanging in your cube

While office humor abounds as a means of finding relief in the pathos of employment, work is more than what takes place in an office or on a job site. Work in all its shades defines us, for we are ultimately employed, kept occupied, by God.

Our first task in the Garden was its care. Before the Fall, work was God's gift to us. And it still is. Yet, God attaches the curse to our work. It is on our calling, as employees, employers, parents or children, that we are reminded again and again that our world is askew. However, as believers we are still called by God to work. But what does that work entail? This morning we will see three ways in which God calls us; he calls us to the work of serving, the work of resting and the work of creating.

So no matter whether you work for GE or 7-11, whether your job title is that of director or dishwasher, president or parent, God calls you to work. READ 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12.

Our passage this morning comes on the heels of Paul's instructions regarding the proper view of sex. The two topics are not so dissimilar. In both cases Paul describes what it means to please God, that his readers are doing well, but there is more to do. As we saw last week, in our sexual brokenness we trespass and defraud our brother. Here we will see a further extension of what brotherly love looks like.

Paul compliments them in v9, saying that they need nothing more to be written to them, but then he goes on and writes out more. They, like us, know these truths. They are rather pedestrian, basic. But yet, it is at this very point, caring for one another that we fail so very often. If you want to know what your work is all about, the bottom line is found here: serving, resting, and creating.

GOD CALLS US TO THE WORK OF SERVING²

Paul begins by urging them in v10b to do *this* more and more. What is *this*? The antecedent is in v9, to love one another. Brotherly love is not an emotional attachment, not a sentimental feeling for others, but is expressed in how they are to view work.

The NIV unfortunately divides vv9 and 10 into two thoughts, but this is a list, expanding what love looks like. It is all in the context of work, of how we live out our lives together. This series of four infinities: *to do this, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs and to work with your hands* all describe our calling from God as how we should work.

At first it sounds as though Paul just wants us to be quiet and have little to do with one another, but what underlies this passage is the theological conviction that flows from creation in Genesis.

1 Thessalonians does not tell us everything we need to know about work, but it assumes a great deal, it is built on the assumptions of Genesis 1.

We don't know the exact problem in Thessalonica. Some commentators say that some ceased working because they believe Jesus was going to return any day. These loafers were giving the church a bad name. To see this some go to 2 Thessalonians 3 as proof.

Others think that the opposite was the problem. Given what is commanded in light of v12, some were becoming revolutionary in their thinking, seeking the radical overthrow of the town, an accusation that was lodged against Paul when he was there as we see in Acts 17.

What we do know is that he is not condemning unemployment, that is people who want jobs but can't find them, but condemning idleness, those who have work but don't want to do it. He is after people who can work but do not do it.

Paul answers the question that crosses our minds: why work? What is so important about it, other than just feeding our faces or putting a roof over our heads? Is work a necessary evil or does God call us to work for a reason?

Sixty years ago, Dorothy Sayers, a novelist and essayist, wrote an essay entitled, *Why Work?* In this she says that society as a whole and individuals in particular are dying because they do not have the revolutionary, old biblical doctrine of work. The modern doctrine of work sees work, as what you do for a living, work is how you make money so you can do what you want to do. She quotes a friend of hers, a surgeon, who says:

What is happening today is that nobody works for the sake of the thing they do. The real aim in work today is money or status, so doctors practice medicine not to relieve suffering but to make money. The patient is something that happens along the way. Lawyers accept briefs not because of their passion for justice but because this is the profession they've chosen.

Sayers goes on to say, writing just after WWII in Britain:

The reason why men found themselves so happy and so satisfied in the army was that for some of them for the first time in their lives they were doing something not for the sake of the pay, which was miserable, but for the sake of getting something done that really needed doing.

To which, Sayers then defines work in this way...

Work is the gracious expression of creative energy in the service of others.

That is exactly what we see here. Paul is connecting the idea of your work, your job, your vocation, God's calling in your life which serves a specific purpose – it is through that job you are being called by God to love others. You may or may not ever love your job, but you must always love others and your job is the channel.

God calls us to work to serve others.

For some your job description may not state that, but it should be your aim. Paul describes that as a result in v12, working enables you have a good reputation and not to be dependent upon others.

Your work as a mother certainly serves the common good despite the lack of pay. Your work as a student does not put money in your pocket, but it is beneficial to a well-ordered society to have well trained citizens. What you produce or sell may not save souls, but that is not its intent. It should, however, be something of service, of benefit. That is part of God's calling.

Care must be taken so that we properly define what it means to help people, what the common good is. Don't define the common good as something spiritual, for work is tangible, physical, as we will see later. Do not see work as a means to an end, it is part of creation. Its primary goal is not just to evangelize or make money for missionaries.

The first question to ask is how does my work benefit others. Don't begin with yourself, your degree of satisfaction, your status or pay. The first guideline is that your job should be an expression of loving your neighbor, providing a good product, a good service delivered in a morally good fashion.

GOD CALLS US TO THE WORK OF RESTING

We are to be ambitious about rest

The two are not antithetical, but are related; as we see in Genesis 1-2, work leads to rest. Paul combines the two ideas when he says to aspire to live quietly. Literally, Paul is telling them to work hard to be still. Focus on your own business. Taking these two together we see how our calling in life is the work of resting. Paul is not commanding idleness here, but rest is to be a focus in our calling that allows us to see the big picture of God's calling in our lives

Our work is to be done for others and with a view toward rest.

How unlike the way we often live. For many of us work becomes consuming, it is anything but undisturbed. It is noisy, occupying our thoughts day and night. The first step to this quiet occupation is to know the limits of work.

Mind your own affairs – know the limits of what you can and cannot do. I doubt your job description, be it as a mother or machinist states anything about being Superman or Wonder Woman. What is it you are called to be and do? As a parent, your calling is to love and serve your children, not to ensure they achieve academic or athletic perfection.

As an employee, you serve God in your job, not your boss, so to live in fear of a performance review more than you live in fear of your dropping the ball as a mother or father creates an anxiety that need not be there. It cuts out the ability to have restful work.

Rest puts our work into perspective

This is why the pattern of work and rest is instilled in creation and we merely imitate our Creator when we take one day out of seven to breath, to know that we will not starve, the world will not cease spinning because we have gathered to worship and rest.

But this is not the way our culture wants us to think. When we cease loving others in our work and we begin loving the work or ourselves by what our work will produce we buy into the contemporary deification of our vocation. We are told we *can* have it all. You can work harder, play harder, and multitask your way to squeezing 31 hours of activity into a 24-hour day. That's the finding of a study conducted by the American Management Association.

The study concluded that people could add almost 50% more activity to a typical day of 16 waking hours. Similarly, according to U.S. Labor Department figures, the average yearly increase in U.S. workers' productivity has doubled in the last ten years

But at what price? Through technology, people are accomplishing more in less time, but they are feeling overwhelmed by the multiplicity of their lives, according to Ed Reilly, of the AMA.

"There's a sense of fatigue that comes from multitasking," he says. "You can force yourself to keep doing things, but you may not be as effective."³

When we rest from our work, we are forced to recognize work's benefits and limitations.

When work takes on the frenetic pace, when it becomes all-consuming, living quietly is impossible. A Sabbath rest, a day away from the pressures, teaches us that God is in control.

Rest is something many Americans admit they need. In a USA Today survey, it found that: 68% said they needed more fun in their lives, 66% feel stress, 50% are pressured to succeed and the same percentage feel overwhelmed.⁴

Too many of us feel like poor Tattoo the basset hound. Tattoo didn't intend to go for an evening run, but when his owner shut the dog's leash in the car door and took off for a drive with Tattoo still outside the vehicle, the basset had no choice.

Motorcycle officer Terry Filbert noticed a passing vehicle with something dragging behind it: it was "the basset hound picking up his feet and putting them down as fast as he could." He chased the car to a stop. Tattoo was rescued, but not before the dog had reached a speed of 20 to 25 miles per hour, rolling over several times.

Too many of us end up living like Tattoo, our days marked by picking them up and putting them down as fast as we can, but we get no rest.

Author and speaker Gordon MacDonald, whose own life illustrates the need to heed the admonitions the first 12 verses of 1 Thessalonians 4, has wisely stated: "I'm of the opinion that busyness is a deeper threat to the soul than pornography ever was."⁵

I know for some my upcoming sabbatical is a hard pill to swallow. It may seem as though I am stepping down at too critical a time in the life of the church, that my absence just as we've gotten settled here comes with too great a cost. Almost for that reason, I need to rest. I am not so vitally important to this church that if I rest all will collapse. None of us can afford to believe that lie. I've known too many pastors who have burned out by 50 because while understanding their call to serve, they did not practice rest. We are to work with rest in mind, not denying our need for it.

GOD CALLS US TO THE WORK OF CREATING

Paul's final command here in v11 gives us a final guideline as God calls us to work; our work is to be creative. As I said earlier, using Dorothy Sayer's definition of work as the gracious expression of creative energy in the service of others, that is what we see at in v11.

In Paul's day, much like our own, manual labor was generally despised. Plutarch for example wrote:

While we delight in the work, we despise the workman. As with perfumes and dyes; we take a delight in them, but dyers and perfumers we regard as small-minded and vulgar folk.

Likewise in our day, we miss the goodness of work, focusing merely on the effects of the fall while ignoring the fact that in work, in any calling that God gives us, we show the image of God in the creative aspects of our vocations. We then do a disservice when we separate the so-called secular jobs we do from our sacred calling. Again, Dorothy Sayers in her essay, says this:

“How can any one remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his life? The Church’s approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables.”

This is in keeping with the whole of the reformation. For centuries leading up to the Reformation, there was a long-standing belief that leaving society and going to live in a religious monastery was the only real vocation or godly calling in life. Martin Luther took great issue with this. Luther fought to put theological dignity to the everyday work of common people. He didn’t do it to just exalt work, but to emphasize worship. A Christian’s truest calling, he said, their real vocation is to glorify God in all things. That is, people are called primarily to worship. And so to do work properly is to do it as way of worshipping God. John Calvin, in the same vein, said

“No task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight.”

No matter what your job is, you are called to bring order out of chaos and in so doing you imitate God. God’s hands are always in the dirt ... and so should ours be.

In creation he forms the heavens and the earth, in the incarnation he takes on flesh, in redemption he bleeds and dies and in the final consummation he recreates the universe. God makes the physical, redeems the physical and reorders the physical. Don’t ever think we can attain the divine by means of escaping matter. For that very reason, all work has dignity and value; there is no ethical job that is degrading. If you bring order out of chaos by cleaning toilets or preaching sermons – it is taking the material world that God made and making it more livable. Your job is to mirror your master who is a Creator. We are being redeemed not out of the world but for the world

And in so doing, we love others, and as the overarching principle mentioned in 4:1 – we please God. We are not working to please our employer or please ourselves. Nor do we work to appease God, to try to earn his favor or turn his anger away from us by being good worker bees.

When we understand that God has created us and redeemed us, that his pleasure is ours because of Christ’s work on the cross for us and that God calls us to work, then we can work with gusto, we can rest with ease, we can serve others because we know that this is what we were made for. If you work for personal fulfillment, the work either will kill you, physically or emotionally. If you work for Him, there is a deep rest knowing his pleasure is on you.

This is seen in the classic movie, *Chariots of Fire*, in which Eric Liddell, while planning to go to China as a missionary also enjoyed running. When his sister questions his choices, Eric responds, God has made me for China, but he has also made me fast. When I run I feel his pleasure. His teammate, Harold Abrahams did not have that relationship with Christ, and so said:

I’m 24 and I have never known contentment. I am forever in pursuit; I don’t even know what I am chasing. When I run I have 10 seconds to justify my existence.

Yet, at a critical point, Liddell knew there was a limit to his work. He would not run on Sundays. He knew God does not overwork us; his pleasure is in our work and in our rest. What is your work like? A rested work or restless work? Do you know God’s pleasure because of Christ or are you working hard to find a rest that satisfies.

Jesus said, “Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” If you are in Christ, now, love your neighbor by working to serve them, create for them and rest in God’s grace.

¹ Terry Mattingly's Washington Bureau religion column, "*Spirituality in the Workplace?*" (11-20-02)

² Many of these ideas are taken from a sermon by Tim Keller entitled *Work*, Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

³ Houston Chronicle (6-21-06)

⁴ Lori Joseph and Bob Laird, "Americans Working Too Hard," USA Today Snapshots; source: Hilton Generational Time Survey of 1,220 adults in January 2001

⁵ Gordon MacDonald, "Leader's Insight," LeadershipJournal.net (3-9-06)