

Working...In Light Of His Coming

Series: The Second Coming Of Our Lord

by Ron R. Ritchie

Writing about work in his book *Involvement 11*, John R.W. Stott says,

Some people are very negative towards their job and give the impression that, if possible, work is something to be avoided. This view has been well expressed in this doggerel:

I don't mind work,
If I've nothing else to do;
I quite admit it's true that now and then I shirk
Particularly boring kinds of work; don't you'?
But, on the whole,
I think it's fair to say
Provided I can do it my own way
and that I need not start on it today--
I quite like work!

The same rather casual attitude to work. was illustrated by the following message, which the head of a New York firm put on its notice board: "Some time between starting and quitting thee, without infringing on lunch periods, coffee breaks, rest periods, story-telling, ticket-selling, holiday planning, and the rehashing of yesterday's television programs, we ask that each employee try to find some time for a work break. This may seem radical, but it might aid steady employment and assure regular paychecks:'

Many today struggle with the whole concept of work. I define work as sweating in labor over hard ground, where thorns and thistles abound. In contrast, I define vacation as sitting in Hawaii, drinking pineapple juice and reading a book, with no regard for time. But the Bible teaches that work is extremely valuable, despite our occasional negative feelings towards it. Work is God's gift to us, and we should be able to look at it from his perspective.

In our final passage from Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle, writing in light of the second coming of Christ, shares much insight into this subject of work. He gives three directives to the church at Thessalonica regarding work: first, he says, follow our example of work (3:6-9); secondly, work for your own bread (10-12); and thirdly, mark men who won't work (13-16).

Paul wrote this letter from the city of Corinth in 52 A.D. There, together with Timothy and Silas, the apostle had heard that the Thessalonian Christians had been disturbed by false information that the "day of the Lord" had already arrived. Because they were being persecuted for their faith in Christ, they believed they were living in the period of the tribulation. Thus the apostle wrote a letter of encouragement, instruction and admonition to the family of believers in Thessalonica, setting them straight about the sequence of events of the end times.

In these closing verses of the letter, Paul focuses his attention on the subject of idleness among certain of the believers in Thessalonica. It appears they were taking advantage of the teaching about the return of Christ (or the fact that some of them believed that day had already come). They lay down their tools and refused to do any more work, leaving it up to the Christian community to meet their needs and care for them.

As we begin our study, let us seek a biblical definition of work. Many people are shocked to discover that

work was ordained by God before the Fall ever occurred. Work was not introduced into the human experience because Adam and Eve sinned. In the opening two chapters of Genesis, before the fall ever occurred, scripture says that God created man and woman in his image, and assigned them to be fruitful so as to fill the earth, subdue it and rule over it. Genesis I says that the Creator God "worked" to bring order out of chaos, and concluding each stage of his work with the words "it is good," the sentiments of a worker who is satisfied with his labors. God's final act of creation was to create human beings "in his image." He then gave them the assignment to "be fruitful and fill the earth, to subdue it and rule over it."

Genesis 2 has the account of God laboring in the planting of a garden, and then placing man in the garden to fellowship with him. Man's task was twofold: a) to cultivate the garden, i.e. to serve it (from which we get the word work), and bring out of it its full beauty and potential, the goodness of that which God had already called "good"); and b) to "keep" the garden, i.e. to protect it and be responsible for it as a steward of God. Thus we see that God and man are fellow-workers: God planted the garden, man's assignment was to cultivate and keep it.

When God and man work in concert with each other, therefore, man receives a sense of fulfillment as he shares the fruit of his labors with his family and community. And God receives the glory because his purposes are revealed and fulfilled as man cooperates with him. John Stott comments: "Work is the expenditure of energy (manual or mental or both) in the service of others, which brings fulfillment to the worker, benefit to the community, and glory to God."

Now let us look at the concept of work after the fall. Following Adam's sin, God cursed the ground. From that day forward, Adam and all of mankind who followed him were forced to depend upon God for wisdom and strength to cultivate and keep the earth. Henceforth man had to contend with hard ground, thorns and thistles, laboring by the sweat of his brow. Despite the frustration and hardship, however, work remains a good gift of God to man. As we ask God to produce in us a thankful attitude toward our work, then we will discover joy in serving others.

Work, then, is a gift of God, designed to be fulfilling to man. Through work we share the fruit of our labors with others; and we bring glory to God. There is a story told of three men digging a foundation. When asked what he was doing, the first man replied that he was earning money to feed his family, while the second man said he was working for beer money. But the third man said he was building a cathedral to the glory of God, which was the architect's plan for the building the men were working on. Your attitude toward work depends on your point of view, doesn't it? No matter what you do to earn your living, God can enable you to feel content as you work to his honor and glory. Work therefore is not a curse, something we are forced to do five days a week in order to pay the bills. Work is a blessing from God for which we should give grateful thanks.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul had urged the leaders of the church to "admonish the unruly," the undisciplined who had bad work habits. It seems these elements had not changed their ways, however, as here in the closing words of his second letter the apostle once again addresses the problem, this time invoking the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. First, he tells the Thessalonians,

1. Follow Our Example of Work 3:6-9

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, that you might follow our example.

Paul is speaking in the name of the Lord and invoking his own authority as an apostle as he addresses this matter of disobedience regarding work "Keep aloof" from such men. the apostle admonishes the Thessalonians This word "keep aloof" was used by seamen when they referred to miring up the sails of a ship But Paul is not

suggesting Christians fool; down their noses or act in a self-righteous fashion toward idlers. Rather he suggests they draw back from them and refuse to subsidize their idleness, with a view to helping them recognize their error. The apostle had already counseled the Thessalonians in his first letter, make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands just as we commanded you: so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need."

Then Paul urges the Thessalonian to follow his example to them while he was among them. He did not 'act in an undisciplined manner among them," he says. He did not come among them expecting them to support and feed him nor did he make them feel they owed him payment for his labors. On the contrary, here is what he said in this context in his first letter: "For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you. We proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers" (2 Th 2:9,10)

When Paul first arrived in Corinth he met Aquila and Priscilla, who were both tent makers (Acts 18). Paul stayed with them and worked with them to meet his needs so that he did not become a burden to the church. This was the apostle's lifestyle all throughout his ministry. As he himself said to the elders at Ephesus, recorded in Acts 20:33-35: "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said. 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Not only did Paul not act in an undisciplined manner among the Thessalonians, he "did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it" either, he says. He is not saying he did not enjoy an occasional meal as a guest in someone's house. Rather he is saying he did not set up one home after another to host him for free meals. He knew that those who fed the flock of God deserved to be cared for as far as shelter and food were concerned, but he did not want to avail himself of that even though he taught that was acceptable behavior. In this he was modeling how a healthy and strong Christian man should regard the gift of work, and how to act in a sensitive fashion toward the body. (It may also have been that some of the Thessalonians were not well off and he wanted to spare them the extra burden of caring for him. Further, he may have wondered how his being cared for by new converts to Christianity would strike non-Christians.) Thus he decided to waive his rights as a teacher and preacher of the gospel.

I am always very encouraged to see how well the body at Peninsula Bible Church is doing in these areas we are addressing. You have a good balance in your work habits. You are not working night and day so as to make money, rather you work to support yourselves and so as not to be a burden to others. And further, you are extremely generous to those who are in need. That is what Paul is trying to impart to the Thessalonian church.

Secondly, the apostle counsels the Thessalonians,

2. Work for Your Own Bread 3:10-12

For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.

It is obvious that Paul is not referring to the lame, the blind, downcast, weak or sick within the church. He is addressing those able-bodied who were taking advantage of the confusion of the second coming of Christ to have their needs met. The Jews had a proverb, "He who does not teach his son a trade, teaches him to steal." As a former rabbi, Paul would have known that rabbis were not paid for their teaching but worked at a trade so as to meet their physical needs. Every day strangers call at our PBC office seeking money and other kinds of help from this church. We respond by saying we will pay them money if they in turn will do some work around the church. Many refuse our offer and walk away. The principle here is, no work, no food.

Paul now moves to charge the idlers in Thessalonica with three counts. First, they were leading an

"undisciplined life" they were playing hooky from work, in other words. They had worked in the past and they could work now, but they were presently avoiding work. Secondly, Paul charges, they were "doing no work at all." Although there was work available they were not availing themselves of it. It was not that they had to join the ranks of the unemployed, as many of our steel workers and heavy industry workers are forced to do today. These people simply refused to do any work at all. Thirdly, the apostle says, they were "acting like busybodies." Rather than work, they chose to be busybodies and gossips, and this caused division in the church. They were using the time which could be used to solve their own problems busily prying into other people's affairs.

In the Didache, an early Christian manuscript, there were included instructions on how to deal with a visitor who came in the name of the Lord. The principles in the following quote from these writings would hold true for the Thessalonians: "If he who comes is a traveler, help him as much as you can, but he shall not stay with you more than two days, or if necessary, three. If he wishes to settle down with you and has a craft, let him work for his bread. But if he has no craft, make such provision for him as your intelligence approves, so that no one shall live with you in idleness as a Christian. If he refuses to do so he is making merchandise of Christ. Beware of such people."

The issue in Thessalonica, of course, was that certain individuals refused to work. To those, Paul says, "Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in a quiet fashion and eat their own bread." The problem had become so serious that Paul was forced to issue a command in the name of the Lord. And that command was: go to work. Even if Christ were to return "tomorrow we should be out working today to his honor and glory, fulfilling the commands God gave to Adam in the garden.

So Paul says to follow his example of work, and work for your own bread. Thirdly, he says, if idle men don't obey the Lord's command concerning work,

3. Mark Men Who Won't Work 3:13-15

But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good. And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

First, Paul offers a word of encouragement to the many members of the Thessaionian church who were seeking to obey the Lord's word by faithfully working for a living. lest they become depressed at the sight of the idlers within their fellowship. The apostle suggests four steps for the working brethren to take with regard to these lazy busybodies.

First, Paul says, 'take special note of that man' Let him be a marked man, the apostle commands. Let him know that the elders together with the other members of the church know who he is. and they will not tolerate his lifestyle. Secondly, "do not associate with him:" says Paul. Break off your fellowship with him for a season so that he will be put to shame. It won't be too long before he will come to his senses and realize that the only way he is going to survive is by working with his own hands. Paul's aim is that this man will be brought to repentance and restoration through a time of disassociation.

Thirdly, Paul says, in a word of caution here, "yet do not regard him as an enemy." Be diligent to remember that he is still your brother, a member of the body, even though he is presently struggling with his view of work. Paul's fourth step logically follows: 'but admonish him as a brother.' Scripture reminds us, "faithful are the wounds of a friend." Move in alongside him and admonish him, Paul says. Show him that he is going the wrong way, and bringing into disrepute the name of Christ and the testimony of the local church. With a gentle rebuke he may be led back onto the path of peace and joy.

At a Careers meeting last week a certain man's name was mentioned. This man has a habit of going from one church to another, seeking money and help from all of them. When he first came to us we counseled him, supplied him with money and found a job for him. But he refused to work and instead went about asking to have his needs met in other churches around this area. Finally, the various churches began to communicate

with one another about him so that now we have marked him, made special note of him, in Paul's words. We are hoping he will come to his senses and join us as a productive Christian, thereby not only meeting his own needs but playing a part in meeting the needs of others.

Paul ends his letter of encouragement, instruction and admonition with these words,

4. The Lord Be With You All 3:16-18

Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all! 1, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

The apostle began his letter with a word of peace, and he concludes with the same words.

Looking back over the letter, we see that the Thessalonians were suffering because of their faith in the Lord Jesus. The apostle encouraged them to persist: the righteous Judge would deal out justice in their behalf at his second coming. Meanwhile, God would use that suffering to bring them to spiritual maturity. They had been shaken by a false prophet, an interpretation of prophecy, a message or a letter purported to come from Paul himself saying that the 'day of the Lord' had already come. They were being deceived by the enemy and had forgotten the order of events concerning the 'day of the Lord;' becoming fearful, confused and anxious as a result. Paul prayed that God would strengthen and protect them from the evil one. They needed to be encouraged that God loved them and was faithful to them. And finally, they were having trouble with certain men who refused to work. This was causing confusion in the minds of believers and unbelievers alike.

In the midst of these trying circumstances, therefore, Paul's closing prayer for the Thessalonians is that 'the Lord of peace himself--continually grant you peace in every circumstance.' "The Lord be with you all!" the apostle exclaims. He prays that not only will they have the peace, but the presence of the Lord in their midst. This, of course, was Jesus' promise to the disciples before his ascension, "Lo, I am with you always."

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all ' is the apostle's final salutation. This was the grace that made their salvation possible. It filled their hearts with a living hope as they looked forward to the day of Christ's second coming. Then he would mete out perfect justice, righting all wrongs, and they would reign with him forever!

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2 Thessalonians 3:6-18
Eighth Message
Ron R. Ritchie
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[Back to Index Page](#)

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