

A Theology of Work

Proverbs 24:27–34, 2 Thessalonians 3:10–12

We pick up again this morning our sermon series in the book of 2 Thessalonians, which we are close to finishing. Second Thessalonians is a letter, but it is no ordinary letter, for it was inspired by the blessed Holy Spirit of God. It is *God's* word, not man's. It is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness.

The Bible teaches about theology, that is, who God is, and what he is like. It also teaches us how to live. In the words of our Shorter Catechism, it teaches “what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.”¹ Man is to believe the truth about God and about his Christ. He is also to live an obedient, God-centered life. The text before us this morning tells us how God wants us to live. Specifically, we will outline a basic theology of *work*. What does the Bible say about work? This, as we will see, affects us all, for God wants us all to be workers.

I have three points this morning: (1) God wants us to work; (2) To refuse to work is sin; (3) Charity should target the truly needy. First,

1. God wants us to work.

This is a takeaway from Paul's exhortation to those members of the church in Thessalonica who refused to work, but wanted to live off the saints' charity. The apostle pointedly says, “Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread” (v. 12).

Here is a basic command to all mankind: God wants us to work. It is his plan that he wants us to work to support ourselves. He wants us to work in quietness and earn our own bread.

The word “bread” has several well-recognized meanings. Almost every culture the world over knows what physical bread is: a baked, leavened food made of flour. But bread can also mean *sustenance*, as in our Lord's immortal words “our daily bread” in the Lord's Prayer: “Give us this day *our daily bread*”—a phrase that goes back to William Tyndale's New Testament of 1534.² A third sense is *livelihood*, as in the expression “he earns his *bread* as a laborer.” In our modern economy a laborer labors for *money*—initially cash, then later a paper paycheck, signed by the boss, but now, probably an electronic deposit deposited into a bank account. The money that is earned is then used to buy one's daily bread, that is, one's “necessary food.” It was said by Job, “I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my *necessary food*” (Job 23:12); would that this would be the

¹ Shorter Catechism 3, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

² “Giue vs this day oure dayly breede” (as cited in the 19th century *English Hexapla*). Rheims (1582) has “Giue us to day our supersubstantial bread” (an allusion to the Roman Mass, in which it is alleged that the priest has the power to change physical bread into the very body of Christ).

estimate of us all! We need physical food to sustain our earthly life, but we need spiritual food—the Word of the Lord, the “bread from heaven”—to sustain us eternally. May God help us all to desire the pure milk of the word, that we may grow thereby (1 Pet. 2:2).

Humans were created to be eaters. Eating is a manifestation of our common humanity. Eating is not to be a purely selfish endeavor. “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

So God wants us to work. He wants us to work to sustain life, to provide for our necessary food. God gives the gift of life, and his creation gives us the means to provide it. In Eden before the fall God said, “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat”—every tree, that is, except one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God provided the trees, but it was up to Adam and Eve to go around and harvest their bounty. Later, he would provide that farmers in Israel not harvest the edges of their fields, for they would serve the poorest of the poor, who were legally allowed to do the hard work of gleaning, harvesting the least desirable, more difficult to reach, more thinly spaced heads of grain. And after gleaning, much work remained: the tedious work of cutting the stalks and collecting the wheat grains, which must be cleaned to remove any debris, and then milled to produce the flour used to bake bread. All of these steps involved work which must be repeated, day after day, to sustain life. God gives the gift of life. He provides the conditions suitable for agriculture—fertile soil, sunshine, rain and more—that enable us to feed our families and provide an overflow for the poor. We who are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to live only for ourselves. He allows us six days of labor to provide seven days of food—and then some—so that we can live generously and bless others. “Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need” (Eph. 4:28). To make it our aim to do this results in the blessing of God described in Psalm 144: “That our sons may be as plants grown up in their youth; that our daughters may be as pillars, sculptured in palace style; that our barns may be full, supplying all kinds of produce; that our sheep may bring forth thousands and ten thousands in our fields; that our oxen may be well laden; that there be no breaking in or going out; that there be no outcry in our streets. Happy are the people who are in such a state; happy are the people whose God is the Lord!”

Moreover, since work and the ability to do work are blessings of God, we should not resent or begrudge the fact that God wants us to work. As we go about our daily labor we must do it with the right attitude. Though there is the satisfying feeling of accomplishing a job well done, the primary reason that we work is not to please ourselves, nor to please our boss. Rather, our ultimate aim must be to please *God!* “Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, *as to the Lord*, and not unto men” (Col.

3:23). Christian, let that thought fill your heart as you do the mundane, disagreeable chores that have to be done. When my dear wife has prepared a meal, and she is tired, and I face a sink full of dirty dishes, my first thought might be to look for an excuse to get out of the kitchen—but no, I tell her, “Why don’t you go take a nap and I’ll clean up?” But then I face that sink full of dirty dishes. And rather than thanking the Lord for the great blessing of indoor plumbing—of hot and cold running water, I might be tempted to think, *my* work is so much more important than this; I shouldn’t have to do this, and I might face that pile of dirty dishes with the wrong attitude. Rather than rejoicing that I have the opportunity to serve my spouse and serve my King, I might grumble and complain and feel self-pity. But no! God my loving heavenly Father says that whatever mundane chore that has to be done, I am to do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men. Our Lord sees not only the work we do; he looks also upon the heart, and he takes delight in a servant attitude that works willingly for his glory.

Not only is God glorified by our cheerful work, it is also a testimony to our neighbor. In his first epistle to the Thessalonians Paul had said: “. . . that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and *to work with your own hands*, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing” (1 Thess. 4:11–12). As we work cheerfully with our hands, it is a witness to our neighbor, who will see our good deeds and glorify our Father who is in heaven.

The bottom line: God wants us to work. He wants us to do the work that is set before us for his glory. But the corollary to this is point two,

2. To refuse to work is sin.

Consider verse 11, “For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies.”

The word translated “in a disorderly manner” is *ἀτάκτως*, from the negative prefix *ἀ* and a derivative of a verb meaning *order, appoint, determine*. God is a God of order. He tells us to do all things decently and in order. He wants us to live ordered lives in obedience to his commands, staying within the boundaries he has set up for mankind. *He* is the Lord and giver of life, the King of kings. When he commands, his born-again children say, “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth. I am at your service, eager to follow orders. You are the boss, I am your humble servant.” To refuse to work is to fail to do that which God has ordained and appointed for the human race. It is to walk in a disorderly manner. To deviate from the prescribed order or rule which God has revealed is to bring shame and dishonor upon Christ our Lord. It is a declaration that we, his creatures and servants, have veto power over the Almighty. It is ultimately to declare that we are wiser and more worthy than God. That is blasphemy!

So when Paul speaks of those who walk in a disorderly manner, not working with their hands, but poking into other people's business, he is describing sin. Manifestly, it is undeniable that God wants us to accept the order and position that he has set out for us, working with our hands, minding our own business, so that men can see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven.

“Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways. *When you eat the labor of your hands*, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you” (Ps. 128:1–2).

Contrariwise, to live off the labor of others, when it is in the power of our hands to work, is sin. It is disobedience to the Lord we profess.

God says, “Six days shalt thou labor, and do thy work.”

The fourth commandment establishes the basic rhythm of life: six days of labor, followed by a day of rest and worship with God's people. This establishes that God is Lord over *time*, and has a claim upon the way we use our time. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work” is an integral part of the fourth commandment. Labor is not punishment; the rhythm of labor and rest was established in the Garden of Eden before sin entered the world. “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to *work* it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15 ESV). Work gives fulfillment—a sense of accomplishment. In working man imitates God the Creator.

Even young children should be taught to work. Young children need to be taught to pick up after themselves and help out with simple chores around the home. From a very young age they need to learn that there is no such thing as a free lunch. There is no “entitlement”—the false teaching of statisticians and tyrants that some people have a right to live off the labors of others. The biblical pattern is that parents provide for their young children, and children provide for their aged parents. When they are little, “children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children” (2 Cor. 12:14). At the end of life, caring for aged, infirm parents is the duty of their grown children—not the state. Their parents took care of them when they were young. Now that they have grown old, their children ought to make sure they are not destitute. This is a moral duty. “If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has *denied the faith* and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8). To deny the faith is about as serious a sin as a person could commit. In the case of refusing to work it is not a dogmatic renunciation of Christ—“I hate the Lord and want nothing to do with him forever, so help me God”—rather, it is refusing to work when it is in the power of our hands to do it, and leaving the care of our aged parents to the church or to the state. God wisely put us into families, so that we could care for one another. Our Lord gave evidence of this when on the cross, as he was about to depart this present world, he committed the care of his beloved mother, probably now a widow, to the disciple whom he loved. “He said to His mother, ‘Woman, behold

your son!’ Then He said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother!’ And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.” Beloved, let us follow the example of Christ in caring for our needy family members as we are able.

This brings us to our last point, that

3. Charity should target the truly needy

Consider now verse 10, where Paul says, “even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.”

The phrase “If anyone will not work” could be translated, if anyone “does not *want* to work” or “is not *willing* to work.” In this context I believe this translation nails the meaning and should be preferred. This is the rendering followed by the ESV and NASB. The New American Standard has “if anyone *is not willing to work*, then he is not to eat, either.”

The church at Thessalonica had persons who were physically and mentally *able* to work, but they were not *willing* to work. They simply lacked motivation to work. They were sound in mind and body. They seemingly had no apparent reason that they *could* not work. They simply were not motivated. They might have even been using the apostle Paul’s teaching on the coming of the Lord as an excuse for not working. In 1 Thessalonians 1:10 Paul had commended the church by observing how they had so eagerly “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to *wait* for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” Here is a truth: Christ is coming, and his people ought to wait in expectation of his coming. But it would be a perversion of the truth to reason: God wants me to wait in expectation of the Second Coming; therefore, I will quit my job and go sit somewhere and wait for him to return. That is *not* what God wants us to do! Rather, he explicitly says, “Do business till I come” (Luke 19:13). Here is a paradox: we are at the same time to give due attention our earthly business as we wait for the return of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We are to diligently pursue our God-given calling as we look for and hasten the second coming of our Lord.

Let’s take a closer look at the phrase “if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.” Here, as we have observed, is a person who is healthy and physically fit. He would be *able*, if he had the motivation, to get a job and hold down a job. He could get married, support a family and be a supporter of Christian charity. But there’s a problem: he is not willing to work. He wants to live the easy life and depend on the generosity of others—perhaps his parents, other relatives, or the church. Paul correctly identifies this as *sin*, and he warns that the man who refuses to work should not be eligible to be financially supported by the church’s diaconal fund. He knows he should be working, but he’s disinclined to work. As it says in the book of James, “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (Jas. 4:17).

One of the big problems that we face as individuals is correctly deducing our motivation. All of us need to pray for wisdom in discerning the difference between *willing* and *able*. Often it is: I am stuck in a sin. It is pleasurable. I do not want to give it up, even when it is pointed out to me, so I go on committing that sin.

One of the most useful verses in this connection is Philippians 2:12–13, “. . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”

Justification is monergistic. That means that it is solely the work of God alone: “It is God who justifies” (Rom. 8:33). But sanctification is synergistic. It begins with the work of God: “it is God who works in you”; but it continues with the believer’s obedience: “work out your own salvation”—that is, carry out to completion what is begun in you.³ God, through his Spirit, has begun a good work in us, his born-again children; therefore, it is our duty to live out our faith with a life of obedience. Our prayer should be that of the Psalmist in Psalm 143:10, “*Teach me to do thy will*; for thou art my God: thy spirit is good; lead me into the land of uprightness.” Is this *your* heartfelt prayer? Do you want, more than anything else, to live obediently before the Lord, your King? Pray to God that it would be so!

How does this apply to charity?

“If anyone will not work [that is, is not willing to work], neither shall he eat.” The meaning: if someone *refuses* to work, then he should not eat at *church* expense, through the church’s diaconal ministry. Charity (which in the Bible is always voluntary, never tax supported) should be reserved for the truly needy.

Here is the pressing question: the difference between “will not” and “cannot.” It is essential to discern our motives. We might say something like, “I’m sorry I can’t get together with you tomorrow.” “Can’t get together” implies that I’m unable, that I have another commitment that I cannot get out of. But what if that’s not entirely the case? What if we are not really interested in getting together, and what we’re actually doing is looking for a socially-acceptable excuse that will get us off the hook? In that case, we are being untruthful. We need to remember that God’s Word requires us to put away lying and speak the truth with our neighbor. Further, we need to remember that “all liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.”⁴

And when we pray, it is especially important that we be open, honest and transparent. After all, God knows the thoughts and intents of our heart. All things are open and laid bare before him, and he wants us to be honest.

Our tendency to be dishonest shows us our need for Christ. It is impossible for us to merit heaven, for we have fallen short of the glory of God. His standard is

³ Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/philippians/2-12.htm>

⁴ Rev. 21:8

absolute perfection, and we do not measure up. We stretch the truth to our own advantage. We need a Savior—him who is truth itself. The Savior is the Lord Jesus Christ, the only one who merits heaven. We need to confess our sins and turn to him as Savior and Lord, relying on him alone for our salvation. Then we must begin the lifelong process of bringing our lives into conformity with his holy Word.

This, then, is a theology of work. God wants us to work for his glory. Amen.