

**Title: The Joy of Work**

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**Text: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13**

I love the opening scene in the animated movie called Antz. A drone named Zee (actually Z-4195) complains to his psychologist about the drudgery of work and his meaningless existence. He says *It's this whole gung-ho super-organism thing that, that, I - you know, I try but I can't get it. I mean, you know, I'm supposed to do everything for the colony, but what about my needs? What about me? I mean, I gotta believe there's someplace out there that's better than this! Otherwise, I will just curl up in a larval position and weep! The whole system makes me feel-insignificant!* Then, at the end of the therapy session, the psychologist responds like Dr. Phil with an insightful summary, and ends with: *"Yes, Zee, you are insignificant."*

Unfortunately, that is a common feeling in today's world toward the drudgery of work. Every Monday morning there must be millions of people who dread going to work. They feel like they're caught in a rat race with no chance of winning, the hum-drum grind day after day with little sense of accomplishment. For example, picture these scenarios:

Rhonda drops off her kids off at the day care center, thinking as she leaves: "I work a full-time job just to get medical benefits, and most of my pay goes to child care."

George is caught in rush hour traffic at 7:30 am. He mutters: "I hate this long commute to work. An hour and half every morning, day after day, the same thing."

Nineteen year old Lydia tugs on a uniform at a fast foods restaurant, saying to herself: "I'll never get out of this dead end job. I am trapped, with no way to move up."

Twenty-five year old Carlos endures a lecture from his section supervisor at a factory. Then he comments to a fellow worker. "I hate working here. They talk to me like I'm pond scum. I feel like my life is a waste."

Such vignettes are not fantasy. They are examples of real life people in our culture, in our country, in our churches, who are supposed to be ecstatic, or at the very least thankful, for the privilege of living in the great land of opportunity, at the most fascinating time in all history, with cell phones, microwave foods, the world wide web at our fingertips and all the commodities we can afford delivered to our door by Amazon. Life is great. But untold millions of Americans feel empty, wrung out, and unfulfilled, and certainly unappreciated. They do not take pride in their work, but see it as drudgery. You drive home in a three year old Nissan Altima with air conditioning and surround sound stereo, but imagine yourself as a pitiful galley slave rowing a Roman barge. And nobody shows the least bit of sympathy.

Here's a little bit of humor that illustrates the point. Jim McAfee had worked at a manufacturing plant 23 years and he never missed a day and was never late. One day he did not show. The whole plant was in shock. The boss paced back and forth in his office. Finally, at ten fifteen, Jim stepped out of elevator, clothes dusty and torn, face scratched, glasses bent. He limped to the time clock and punched in. The boss asked where he'd been. "I tripped and rolled down two

flights of stairs in the subway. Nearly killed myself." The boss looked at him and said sternly, "You need to improve your time management skills. How could it take you an hour and a quarter just to roll down two flights of stairs?"

So, today I want to impress on you the possibility of rediscovering meaning, purpose, and joy in work. We all need to recapture the same sense of pride as a seventeenth century craftsman who engraved his initials on a hand-made saddle, or a baker who sold her fresh bread at an open market and smiled and nodded gratitude with each coin she received. We need to learn again how to go to work and return home whistling a happy tune and sleep better at night believing that what you do for a living matters. I believe there is a theology of work that emerges naturally from the Gospel.

The text on which I base this lesson is from Paul's second letter to the church in a town now called Thessaloniki, an ancient sea port in northern Greece (then Macedonia). It reads, in the NIV:

*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[a] you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, 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. 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. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat." We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.*

On reading this aloud we cannot help but think of a problem in our own time, with many people who find excuses not to work for a living but rather to lean on family and friends to support them or bail them out of trouble. There are even those who find ways of manipulating the system to get an income, essentially living off taxes paid by a nation of working people. It may sound harsh, but this is the reason so many political conservatives (which I am not) resist political decisions that lead toward a welfare state.

But this message I offer here is not political. It's theological, and spiritual. And all those who value biblical principles cannot avoid the ancient conviction that working for a living is a duty—a responsibility, and essential component of life. We are created in the image of God and God's nature is to work, to be productive, to maintain, to nurture. So that is part of our purpose too. Jesus said "I work because my father works."

So, the followers of Jesus are marked by his nature, to be working people. Numerous New Testament texts reinforce a strong work ethic. I Timothy 4:11 *If anyone will not work, neither should he eat.* I Timothy 5:8 *One who does not work to take care of responsibilities has denied the faith and is worse than infidel.* Ephesians 4:28 *Let him who stole steal no more, but let him work so that he may have to share with others.* Ephesians 6:5-8 *Serve your master as unto the Lord* (master-slave relationships in the ancient world translate sensibly to the free enterprise system today).

That is the ethical and theological platform for the Christian's view of work. To embrace God is to recognize God's nature in ourselves. To be a Christian is to allow the spirit of Christ dominate us (that is the essence of lordship).

However, there are other principles that naturally emerge when we embrace the responsibility of work. Principles that show up in our attitudes and our whole state of mind. It is evident up in the office, out in the field, and down on the factory floor. It is evident when we sit down at the family table, and when we lay our heads to rest at night. It is, in simple terms, the joy of work.

The earliest Christian writer to focus on this idea was a priest named Benedict, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. He lived in an era when it was thought that if you really want to embrace God, you have to abandon the mundane and join a monastic order. He founded an order that still today bears his name (the Benedictines). He realized that many believed the demands of mundane life were meaningless and kept them from serving God. He wrote a strict book of rules of conduct, with chores like growing crops, tending livestock, maintaining quarters, cooking, all essential to maintaining a community life. Most important, he stressed that this must be done with joy, for that is how to serve God through work. Those concepts are valuable for all of us.

First, we have to recognize that work is a privilege, not a curse. The story of the Fall in Genesis has left a bad taste in our mouths. Adam and Eve ate forbidden fruit, and God said "by the sweat of your brow you will toil." So people have concluded that work is a curse, and sin robbed us life in Paradise. No more relaxing under a palm tree, sipping a pina colada, feeling the cool breeze blowing through the oasis. But that's a false picture. We need to see that it is a privilege to be able to work, and part of what gives life meaning.

To work is to share in a partnership with God. Both accounts of creation portray humanity as having custodial care of world God created (cultivating, supervising, herding). The New Testament echoes that in 2 Corinthians 6:1 with the words "co-workers with God." Every day it's God and you out on that freeway, dropping off kids, serving customers, filling orders, making deliveries, taking cows to market, and so on. But the difference is doing it with the joy of divine partnership. All day you and God are engaged in a cooperative work to make good things happen in a world where evil abounds.

Second, it is logical that the work arena where we spend a large portion of our lives should also be a venue for Christian mission. Carl Henry wrote half a century ago: *Through the Christian on the job the world meets the church. But it meets far more. It meets the Divine Worker. The extent the worker understands this will also determine how he (or she) answers the question "What difference does Christianity make in my job?"* (Aspects of Christian Social Ethics, Eerdmans, 1964, p. 45). That does not mean stealing time from doing your job to hold a Bible class or prayer session, or flaunting your religiosity in front of people. Jesus spoke against praying and doing good deeds in public "in order to be seen." That's "all kinds of twisted," and not the ideal way to "take God to work." Rather it should be in a transformed attitude about work, a spirit of joy, diligence, and pride, that attracts people to your faith in subtle and unobtrusive ways. Doing that will restore unspeakable joy to even the most humble type of work.

Several years ago I was education director in a couple of vocational schools. One year at graduation the school director wanted to play the Disney song “Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it’s off to work we go,” sung by the seven dwarfs in the film Snow White. She thought that would be a cute send-off for the graduates. When I listened carefully to the words, I discovered that the seven little guys carrying picks and shovels were not singing about the joy of going to work, but the joy of going home. They, like the ant Zee, were caught up in a meaningless task with no joy or fulfillment. They sang *We dig dig dig from early morn till night, We dig dig dig up everything in sight. We dig up diamonds by the score, A thousand rubies, sometimes more, But we don't know what we dig 'em for. Heigh-ho, heigh-ho it's home from work we go!*

I once saw a bumper sticker “I owe, I owe, So off to work I go!” That’s the song most people sing. And like the seven dwarfs, their only joy is going home, not going to work.

So, a part of “being Christian” is to adopt the mind-set, the attitude, the spirit of Jesus Christ concerning every part of life. And concerning work, that involves working for the “man” as if working for God, with diligence, honesty, integrity, loyalty, and pride. With such comes a rediscovery of the joy of work. To adopt an attitude that puts a spring in step and song in hearts. Turns ho hum drudgery in a hi-ho adventure. To go to sleep at night with sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, and wake up refreshed, eager to tackle the challenges and embrace the opportunities of the day. That can be yours if you want it.