



“Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise,” Proverbs 6:6.

The Stewardship of Labor

Central Truth: God’s plan is for man to work for his material needs.

L150. Date: July 1986. **Text:** II Thessalonians 3:6-13; Proverbs 6:6-11.

Topic: Stewardship; Work.

God's plan is that people should work for their material needs. No person who is capable of productive activity should depend on others for his provision.

Labor is honorable for all persons in all its aspects. It means that one produces goods or services which benefit other people and thereby becomes a blessing to the workman.

Even Jesus worked with His hands in the profession of carpentry. In Mark 6:3, He is called a *tekton*, which is Greek for “a worker in wood.” God not only sent His Son as a man, but — even more significantly — He sent Him as a working man. The fact that the Son of God labored with His hands elevates the state of those who engage in productive labor today.

A society is in trouble when it denies the dignity of work. Yet our western society is in danger of doing just that! It is not the idle rich who are the backbone of a nation, but the laboring people without whose products and services the idle rich would starve. Thank God for the farmers, merchants, truck drivers, plumbers, electricians, medical personnel, carpenters, pastors, teachers, and so many other persons who make our lives comfortable today. Thank God for the people who are willing to work, as God commanded.

I. THE DEMAND FOR WORK

A. Work was assigned of God in the original creation before sin entered. Genesis 2:7 reports the divine creation of the original human.

Genesis 2:15 reports, *“The LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.”* What did Adam do in the Garden of Eden? He was there to work: *“to dress it and to keep it.”* That was before Eve was created, before sin entered human experience. Work is not a result of the curse of sin. Man worked before sin entered. Man will work after sin's curse is gone (Revelation 22:3). God created man capable of creative labor and in need of performing it.

B. Work was the example set by God in His own labor of creation.

“On the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made” (Genesis 2:2). Only His work of creation ended then. Jesus explained His personal ministry on earth, saying, *“My Father worketh hitherto, and I work”* (John 5:17). That indicates that God is still at work. His work of original creation has ended, but the work of recreation (the redemption of sinners) continues still.

C. Work is performed by the animals of the earth. The lazy person is advised, *“Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest”* (Proverbs 6:6, 7). Jesus said that the Father feeds the birds of the air (Matthew 6:26); a wise person observed, *“Yes, He does; but He does not place the food in the nest.”* The birds must work for their food (seeking it out) the same as the other creatures — including man!

D. Work is commanded of God. *“Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good”* (Ephesians 4:28). That principle applies not only to reformed thieves, but also to all other persons. *“Study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands”* (I Thessalonians 4:11). *“This we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. . . . We command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread”* (II Thessalonians 3:10, 12). God has never changed that law.

E. Work is designed for human benefit. Productive labor fulfills a person and rejoices his heart. *“The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much”* (Ecclesiastes 5:12). It is by honest labor that one provides for himself and his dependents (Proverbs 6:9-11). Rejoice at the opportunity to work!

II. THE DEPRAVITY OF WORK

If work is such a blessing, why is it so demanding and difficult today?

Why do so many people try to escape it?

A. Work became burdensome because of human sin. Adam ministered with delight in the Garden of Eden as he worked *“to dress it and to keep it”* (Genesis 2:15). But after sin entered, this became his work assignment: *“Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; . . . in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground”* (Genesis 3:17-19). From that time forth, work became a burdensome thing to humanity. Work (productive activity) became labor (burdensome toil), not because of God's assignment but because of human sin.

B. Work became less productive because of sin. God decreed that Adam and his descendants should plow the soil, plant the seed, and cultivate the crops. *“Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee,”* God announced. And we see the consequences of that today. The farmer's crop is constantly challenged by weeds and grass, floods and drought, insects and disease. The seed which he plants will gradually degenerate over the seasons and become less and less productive. Why? Human sin brought it all. Don't blame God. He provided an ideal environment until man sinned and brought those dread consequences upon himself.

C. Work became only partially fulfilling because of sin. The joy of a job well done is still there, but something is missing. *“I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun. . . . Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun”* (Ecclesiastes 2:11, 18).

Even so, *“I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works”* (Ecclesiastes 3:22). *“Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God”* (Ecclesiastes 5:19).

Work. Work faithfully. Do the best job you are capable of doing. For in spite of the curse of sin, work is the gift of God for your own good.

III. THE DELIGHT OF WORK

A. Work is a delight when it employs God-given skills. I marvel as I watch a good carpenter at work. His tools become almost extensions of himself as he measures, saws, nails, and brings a useful building into form from a mass of lumber. That is a gift of God! Just as God has given spiritual

gifts for spiritual ministry (I Corinthians 12; Romans 12), so He has given natural talents for work in material things. Determine your area of work and be busy in it.

B. Work is a delight when it brings glory to God. And it can! Even your secular labor can glorify God. The Bible says, “*Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God*” (I Corinthians 10:31). The Christian witness for God is seen in the quality of his workmanship and the spirit in which he pursues it. A lazy worker is a poor witness. The Christian must be “*not slothful in business*” (Romans 12:11); that applies to any business, whether secular labor or spiritual ministry. Let the word go through a community that a Christian makes the best employee because of his faithfulness to work. Let it be known that a Christian is the best businessman because he is honest and fair. Let every Christian serve with good will, because he is the servant of Christ and represents Him before others (Ephesians 6:7). Be a plumber, farmer, merchant, or whatever to earn your livelihood, but be a workman to the glory of God.

C. Work is a delight because it is remembered of God. “*God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister*” (Hebrews 6:10). Even when one has died in the Lord, his works follow him (Revelation 14:13). What a challenge that is for us to be diligent in all our labor! “*God shall bring every work into judgment*” (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

D. Work is a delight because it meets human need. Thank the Lord that He has given different skills to different people. How hard life would be if we could not help one another using our differing talents for work. God's will is that every able-bodied person should “*labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth*” (Ephesians 4:28). By “*labouring ye ought to support the weak*” (Acts 20:35). The thinker helps the doer. The manual laborer assists the intellectual. The “country bumpkin” renders an invaluable service to the “city dude.” We need one another. Each can help provide what the other needs, and each can find his own need supplied thereby.

E. Work is a delight when it is blessed of God. And He does bless the labor of our hands. An appropriate prayer for each working person is expressed in Psalm 90:17: “*Let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.*” There is a great difference between God's favor being upon our work and our income and His displeasure being upon us. (Contrast Haggai 1:6, 9-11 with Malachi 3:10-12 to see the difference stated biblically.) Thank God often for His blessings upon your work.

IV. THE HIGHER WORK

A. The service of God is the highest work one can do. Whatever your profession, *“ye serve the Lord Christ”* (Colossians 3:24). Do your duty as if you were doing it for the Lord alone, for in a sense you are! If God lives in you by the indwelling Holy Spirit, you must live and work like God would. Work with *“singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord”* (Ephesians 6:5-8)

B. We serve God by serving people in the name of God. Jesus will say to certain ones, *“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me”*; and to certain others, *“Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me”* (Matthew 25:40, 45). God is concerned about people. We can serve God today by serving people in His name.

God built an impressive illustration in the land of Palestine. The Sea of Galilee receives the waters of the Jordan River on the north and dispenses those waters on the south. Receiving and giving as it does, it teems with fish and is surrounded by lush vegetation. The Dead Sea receives those same waters of the Jordan, but it does not give them forth. So it is literally dead. No fish swim in it and no vegetation grows around it. That illustration teaches us that if we want vitality in our lives, we must devote ourselves to giving forth in service what God gives to us in supply.

You are a steward of your own work. Will the Lord say, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” when you account to Him?

Questions

1. What does Mark 6:3 say about Jesus as a working man?
2. How does Genesis 2:15 show that work is not a curse of sin?
3. How does Genesis 2:2 elevate the dignity of work?
4. What do the insects of earth teach us about work?
5. In what Scripture passages does God command us to work?
6. Why did work become such a burden to mankind?
7. How can humans find delight again in their labor?
8. What is the “higher work” God has assigned to us?

9. How can you serve God this week?
10. How can you become a better Christian steward in your work?