

# IS WORK A CURSE?

by Ray C. Stedman

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Our final study in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians deals with the value of work. It is a rather strange subject for Sunday worship, but one that we should find profitable.

If you have ever gone into any of the Charlie Brown restaurants in this area you will have seen displayed somewhere the words, "Work is the curse of the drinking class." That is clearly a reversal of the old maxim, "Drink is the curse of the working class."

Many people think of work as a kind of curse, something that has been imposed upon man because of the Fall. But work is really a blessing, though we tend to forget that at times. The "flower children" of the '60's got the idea that work was something they did not need, and that a good living would somehow fall out of the sky upon them. Many of them dropped out of the rat race, went out in the countryside and tried to live without working.

In every day and age, there are freeloaders who want to live off someone else's work. Today we are cursed with welfare abusers who take money from the government with no thought of working on their part. They are perfectly able to work, but they will not do so.

It is interesting that we have, two thousand years later, the same problem they had in the city of Thessalonica. There were certain people in the church there who refused to work.

Some scholars have felt that they were doing so because they expected the Lord Jesus to return at any moment. Here again is one of the strange phenomena that has assailed the Christian testimony through the centuries. There is always a lunatic fringe who want to push too far the hope of our Lord's return. They use the promise of his coming to develop some kind of far-out activity that brings disrepute upon that doctrine.

Recently I heard of a man who actually bought a new Cadillac which he could not afford. He managed to get the down payment together and bought the car thinking that he would never have to make another payment because the Lord's return was imminent.

The apostle does not say what was causing the Thessalonians to stop working, but he faces the fact of it. It may have been that they were living in a kind of a Christian commune together, sharing the labor and the food, etc. In the book of Acts there is a reference to the early Christians, saying, "there was none among them who lacked, for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds and laid them at the apostle's feet and they distributed to each as anyone had need," {cf, Acts 4:34-35}. Historians do not feel that condition obtained long in the early church, but that may have been the case in this pioneer church in Thessalonica. At any rate there were some people who had decided not to work anymore, and they were living off the good will and kindness of others. Paul has a word for the church about them in Chapter 3, Verse 6:

**Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. {2 Th 3:6 RSV}**

"Withdraw from them," says Paul, "do not have anything to do with them. Leave them alone." That may seem to us rather ungracious and far removed from what a Christian's reaction ought to be. We are instructed everywhere in the Word of God to share with people, to be aware of their needs; if people are hungry we are to feed them, etc. It may seem to be a contradiction of this that the apostle should say to these believers in Thessalonica, "If someone will not work, do not have anything to do with him." This form of ostracism is a very painful penalty, and it may seem too severe to us.

The reason the apostle gives is because a refusal to work is really a violation of Scripture. Notice how he definitely states that this advice to keep away bears the imprimatur of the Lord Jesus himself: "in the name

of our Lord Jesus Christ." This is not merely a suggestion on his part.

As Ted Koppel said in his Harvard commencement address, "When Moses brought down the Ten Commandments from the Mount of Sinai, these were not ten suggestions!"

Neither is this. It is a command that has the full authority of Christ behind it.

The reason is because it disregards the Scriptures: "It is not in accord with the tradition that you received from us," says Paul. That is very revealing. Christianity has, at the core of it, a recognition of the need of people to work. In these days when it is so easy to live off the government or others' charity, this is a very important command. The Lord himself had said to the disciples, "Occupy till I come," {Luke 19:13b KJV}. There is no place in his word authorizing anyone to stop work because he expected the Lord Jesus to return.

It is helpful to remember that God had ordained work before the Fall of man. Adam, when he was created, was given a job to do right from the beginning. God gave him a commission to till and to keep the garden, also to name the animals. He had to work to do that. God gave man a beautiful earth filled with wonderful resources which we have been using up rapidly through all the centuries since. But we are still discovering new things that he has hidden in his cupboard for man to live on. One of the blessings was that man should work. "Six days shalt thou labor," God had said, "and on the seventh shall be a day of rest," {cf, Exod 20:9-10 KJV}. Work, then, is part of what the Scripture calls the image of God in man. God is a worker. He has devised marvelous things in a universe that is filled with mysteries and marvels; intricate, involved complexities that we are only now beginning to unravel. With all our modern technological advance, we are merely dabbling in the shallows of the great wonders that God has packed into the universe around us, all designed by the working mind of the Creator. Since man is made in the image of God, it means there are abilities, resources, and possibilities within him that need to be put to work. In doing so, man will find a sense of fulfillment for himself.

That is why the apostle devotes such a large section of this letter to dealing with this problem. Ordinarily a problem like this would only call for one or two verses of advice, but here a major portion of this brief letter is devoted to this subject.

I saw a bumper sticker the other day that said, "The worst day of fishing is better than the best day of working."

If that meant only a day or two of fishing I could understand that philosophy. Fishing is fun, but I would hate to be sentenced to fishing every day of my life! I would not mind working, because work is intriguing. It demands something of you; it is worthwhile. Some of you may say, "That may be true for your work, but my work is very humdrum and routine. I do the same old things over and over, and I get so tired of it." There is work like that, but the answer of Scripture to that situation is, "whatsoever you do in word or deed, do to the glory of God" {cf, Col 3:17 KJV}, i.e., offer it as unto Jesus. Even routine work can become very acceptable if you are concerned to do it as unto the Lord; every product that you turn out or every pull of the handle that you are responsible for, is done as unto the Lord; it is something he has asked you to do. That is the Christian philosophy of work. By means of that, we can transform even humdrum work into that which is meaningful and worthwhile.

The second reason the apostle gives for this rather severe demand to withdraw from people who will not work is because it deliberately ignores the apostle's own example.

**For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, we did not eat any one's bread without paying, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you. It was not because we have not that right, but to give you in our conduct an example to imitate. {2 Th 3:7-9 RSV}**

It is very helpful to remember that these great men of God who taught us all these marvelous truths in the Scripture were not isolated from the ordinary working world, but were involved in it. Paul had every right, he says, to cease from work. Jesus had said, "The laborer is worthy of his hire" {Luke 10:7b KJV}, i.e., if someone preaches and teaches you spiritual truth, he has the right to expect to be supported in order to have

time for his ministry. This is the whole reasoning behind having pastors who are paid salaries. The apostle recognizes this. He says, "Yes, I have that right, but I chose not to do it." Why? "Because I did not want to be a burden to anybody."

Here I think he is referring primarily to the establishing of a church. Paul was a pioneer. He went into places where there were no churches at all and began to preach, and, thus, brought a church into being. It is these people, fresh out of paganism, with no recognition in their lives of the value of spiritual truth until they came to Christ, that he wants to set free from the responsibility to support him. Later on he did receive help from churches. He thanks the Philippians for the help they sent to him in Thessalonica. So it is not true, as some have claimed, that he did not ever receive help, or take money, from those whom he had led to Christ, but in the beginning he did not do so because he did not want to become a burden upon anyone. He worked "night and day," laboring at his trade of tent making, in order that he might pay people for the food that he was eating. It is clear from this that he deliberately left a model for others in order that they might understand how to reach out to others with the message of salvation without cost to them.

I was thinking of Paul the other day as I watched on television the media's reaction to the moral collapse of Jimmy Swaggart. I watched as this man left his 2-1/2 million dollar mansion, boarded his private plane and flew to a meeting at which he was to make the vivid confession that all the country has seen. Suddenly into my mind there flashed the picture of the great Apostle Paul, working by candlelight late into the night (perhaps long after midnight), sewing his canvasses together to make tents to sell the next morning so he would have money to pay for the food he was eating. What a contrast! It occurred to me that, if Jimmy Swaggart had not been so self-indulgent in his life-style, he might have had more spiritual power to resist the temptations to which he succumbed.

Keep away from people who refuse to work, says the apostle. Do not have anything to do socially with people like that. But not only withdraw, he says, withhold food from them.

**For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If anyone will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. {2 Th 3:10-11 RSV}**

Notice that it is not, "if any cannot work," but, "if any will not work." People who cannot work because there is no work, also need our help. Paul is not talking about such conditions. But even today there are always a few who could work, but are deliberately keeping away from it because they have found it is easier to beg, or to rip off someone with a clever story.

Hardly a week goes by here at this church but that we have people coming by asking us for help. Just last Sunday a man approached me after the service and asked me to give him some money. He told a heartrending story about how his family was suffering. It was impossible for me to check on it so I could not tell whether he was telling the truth or not. I gave him a little money because I always remember the words of the Lord in the Sermon on the Mount, "Give to him that asks of you, and do not withhold," {cf, Matt 5:32}. But I often wonder if people like this do not fall into the category that Paul is dealing with here. If we can find out that they could work, but they do not choose to work, then we are to hold back from helping them, even by giving them food, says the apostle.

A man came by not long ago and asked one of our elders for money. The elder gave him a small amount, and watched him as he went to the next church down the line and then headed for the next one. This particular elder did not think that was right, and he did something about it. He followed the man up and confronted him, saying, "Look, I gave you money in good faith because I thought you needed it, but here you are now going to the next church, and you probably plan to go right on down the line." He made it clear to him that was an action that was not acceptable in our eyes here.

The reason the apostle says to take this drastic action -- to let them starve if they are not really willing to work -- is because he wanted to prevent something worse. He says people who will not work become busybodies, i.e. meddlers, people who concern themselves with other people's affairs. Such people try to get involved with things they have no business getting involved with, and go around generally stirring up difficulty and trouble. Those who will not work, if they are not busy, become busybodies! This is the point he is making.

Someone has said those people who are willing to work are like mules: When they are pulling they cannot kick, and when they are kicking they cannot pull.

That is another reason why work is necessary.

Paul directly addresses these people in Verse 12:

**Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ [again, the authority of Christ] to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. {2 Th 3:12 RSV}**

There is no misunderstanding of these words. "You can work," says the apostle. "You have an able body, and a good mind. Now, go to work, and earn your own living." It is a serious matter when you do not work. Those who refuse to do so are not allowing themselves to be fulfilled in the way God intended. They are cheating others as well, and they are keeping busy only by meddling in other people's affairs.

There is a proverb that comes to mind in this regard: "He that passes by and meddles with something belonging not to him is like one who takes hold of a dog by the ears," {cf, Prov 26:17}. Imagine grabbing a pit bull by the ears! That is what the book of Proverbs says meddlers are risking!

The apostle goes on to counsel the leadership of the church on how to handle problems like these. He lists four things:

**Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing.**

**If any one refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. {2 Th 3:13-15 RSV}**

- First, do not give up on them. That is because they really are brothers. Do not be impatient. Spend a little time working on this. That is what he is saying. "Do not be weary in well-doing."
- Second, do not evade a confrontation: "note that man." Do not just hope that the problem will pass away and so do nothing about it. Take note of it.
- Third, try to make him feel ashamed of himself. Everyone has a conscience, that little voice inside that protests when we do not fulfill what we were intended to do or be. We may not admit it, but we know inside us that there is something wrong. Therefore Scripture addresses its appeal always to the conscience, to the inner witness that will urge us to do it. Paul's advice is to make him feel ashamed of freeloading, of depending on others for food that he requires but is unwilling to do anything about himself.
- And, fourth, do not carry it too far. Do not make him feel like an enemy. Do not make him feel that he is not even a Christian. He is a brother confused, and he needs help, but he is not an unbeliever.

As we bring this to a close, I would like to raise again the question: "Why is work so important?"

What is it about working that the apostle (and the Lord himself) sees as so valuable that he would take all this time to deal with it? It is becoming clear from this that work is divinely intended to give us a sense of self-worth. When you are working, you feel like you are accomplishing something. When you are laid off and are unable to work, you feel out of sorts and unable to function as you were intended. It is disturbing and psychologically upsetting to be without work. It is really a testimony to the fact that God made us to work. Work, therefore, is not a curse. It is a very valuable thing because it gives us a sense of meaning for our lives.

The lack of work is the explanation for much of the tremendous appeal today of drugs to young people. I have been watching the television news about the riots in Hunter's Point in San Francisco. Crowds of fine young black men and women, splendid, strong, sturdy looking young people, have nothing to do because they cannot find work. The unemployment level of young blacks today is as high as 80%. As a result they turn to that which gives them a momentary feeling of worthwhileness. That is what drugs can do, I am told, they give one a sense of wellbeing for a while. How can we blame them for turning to something that at least, if only temporarily, gives them that sense? Of course, in the long run it destroys them. It hooks them,

so that they cannot get away. They become slaves to this terrible traffic.

I am alarmed, frankly, when I see what is happening in our country today. Whole cities of the United States are today virtually under siege from invading armies of drug traffickers. Authority is being defied on every side. We are up against a tremendous problem in this regard. The reason is, we have not yet found a solution, in our confused society, to the supply of necessary work.

As a young man in the '30s, living in the heart of the Great Depression, I knew of thousands of men like myself out of work. There was no work to be found in those days anywhere. The government came up with a solution that, as I look back upon it, was a marvelous help. They created, under Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Civilian Conservation Corps. Camps, rather like military camps, were built for young people, mostly young men, where they were fed and clothed, but were also given regular work to do. It was simple work. They built reservoirs and dams around the country, and helped the farmers with their crops. They were paid a minimum amount of money, but I can testify, having seen it in the case of several of my friends, that they were saved from a sense of worthlessness by that work they were given.

It may be time for us to revive that program again.

The letter closes with the recognition of the invisible resources of Christians to deal with any kind of problem.

**Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with you all. {2 Th 3:16 RSV}**

That marvelous statement again presents a factor that I find many Christians seem never to draw upon when facing problems. The promise of God is that, no matter what our problem is, we can have peace in solving it!

Many times when people seek help with a problem they are all upset and troubled. It is evident in the way they talk and in the signs that they project of being deeply troubled. At times I have had to say to someone, "I will be glad to help you with your problem, but you have another problem that has to be solved first, and that is your lack of peace. You are not peaceful. You are a believer, but you are not at peace, and you will never solve the other problem until you learn how to have peace."

This verse highlights that strongly: "The Lord of peace himself is with you." When they were caught up in storms in the Sea of Galilee, Jesus said to the disciples, "Fear not, for I am with you," {cf, Matt 8:24-26}. "I am in control," he was saying. "This boat is not going to sink. The Lord of the ocean is in it. Do not be afraid. I am not going to stop the storm, but I will see you through it."

The Lord of peace himself is with you! We have the right to take from him a peaceful mind, a peaceful attitude, and to remind ourselves that he who can handle problems is with us and will help us work this out. Then, once you are at peace, you can come at the problem with a quite different attitude. This is the way Paul suggests they handle this problem of those who would not work. "The Lord of peace be with you. The Lord be with you all."

In closing, as he does in so many of his letters, he says,

**I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. {2 Th 3:17 RSV}**

We learn from other letters that Paul apparently had trouble with bad eyes. He tells us in the letter to the Galatians that when he came among them at first that they would have given him their own eyes if they could have. Many feel that his "thorn in the flesh" {2 Cor 12:7} was poor eyesight. Perhaps he even had some disfigurement that made him look bad to others. Thus, when he wrote letters he usually dictated them to a secretary, one of the men who traveled with him. But when he came to the close of his letters he would take the pen from the hand of the secretary, and, as he tells us in another place, write with large letters these words, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." That, he says, is the mark of authenticity in

his letters.

It is more than that. It is also the mark that these letters are the very Word of God itself. The apostle everywhere made claim to the fact that the doctrines that he taught, the facts that he imparted, the advice and counsel that he gave, was not his own. It came from the Lord. It was inspired. It was God himself speaking through the man. Even in that early day people were imitating that. The devil is quick to counterfeit something. They were writing letters, supposedly from Paul, and signing his name to them. But when he wrote with large letters the words, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all," that, he said, is the mark of genuineness; no one can imitate this. When you get a letter like that, says Paul, you know it is written by me.

By the way, many of the liberal scholars reject this Second Thessalonian letter as being from Paul because they do not like what it teaches. But here is the mark, in this most challenged of his writings, that it is a letter from the apostle himself.

All of this, then, rests upon the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What would we do without that to live today?

The apostle has made his appeal to us to keep working, to occupy until the Lord comes, to face the problems of life, and to handle them all with the sense that the Lord of peace himself will give us peace in all ways and at all times.

What better benediction could we ask!

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## Appendix

### THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS

COMMENTATORS HAVE OFTEN portrayed the second coming of Jesus as a single dramatic event (Matt. 24:21, 29), following the Great Tribulation, where the Lord will suddenly appear in power and great glory, visible to every eye (Rev. 1:7). The church will be caught up to meet Him and will then return with Him to earth (1 Thess. 4:13-18) where He will judge the living and dead. This either establishes His millennial kingdom or ushers in the new heaven and new earth, depending on which millennial view the commentator holds.

This scenario has numerous difficulties connected with it, however, not least of which are the several promises in the New Testament that the true church will not be present during the Great Tribulation. A key to understanding the teaching of the New Testament on this subject is the Greek word *parousia*. This word is commonly translated "coming," which in the mind of the reader projects the vision of the single dramatic appearance described above. But *parousia* should properly be translated "presence." This is the meaning given first by both Thayer and Arndt and Gingrich lexicons and includes the idea of an entrance, a consequent duration, and either an exit or a continued presence. It is not, therefore, a single event (V), but a continuum (I-----I) of unspecified duration.

This meaning is the only way to make sense of Jesus' revelation in Matthew 24 of His return to earth in the last days. There He describes a coming in power and glory immediately following the terrible time of trouble that He calls "the great tribulation" and the darkening of the sun and moon and the falling of the stars from heaven (Matt. 24:28-30). But it would be impossible for such a coming to take anyone by surprise who knew of our Lord's description. For in the same chapter Jesus speaks of His coming as unexpected and sudden as the flood came upon the people of Noah's day; and He likens it to a thief creeping into a household at night, without warning, and surreptitiously removing its treasure (vv. 36-44). Yet how could His coming be both unexpected and preceded by such cosmic events of dramatic character?

The only answer is that one passage describes His initial, totally unheralded and unexpected appearing while the other describes the disclosure of His presence by a dramatic display of power and glory after the Tribulation has run its course and the sun, moon, and stars have done their predicted thing.

Jesus' coming like a thief would be a fulfillment of I Thessalonians 4:13-18: He would catch up His true church to Himself and then remain on earth during all the events of the Tribulation, but in the same conditions He manifested during His forty-day post-resurrection ministry when He appeared and disappeared at will. After the darkening of the sun and the moon He would disclose His presence to the entire earth in fulfillment of Matthew 24:28-30 and Revelation 1:7. Thus His initial, thief-like coming, His continued presence behind the scenes on earth, and His final revelation in power would all be covered by the term *parousia*. It is noteworthy that where Paul refers to the public revelation of Jesus in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, he calls it "the splendor of his coming" (NIV), which literally means "the *epiphaneia* ("out-shining") of his *parousia* ("presence").

But what happens to the church after it is caught up to meet the Lord in the air, as I Thessalonians 4:13-18 describes? The answer of Scripture is "so shall we ever be with the Lord." Wherever the Lord is, there the church will be also, sharing with Him in His work whatever it will be. But some may object, "I thought the church was to be in heaven with the Lord."

And indeed it will-but what and where is heaven? It is certainly not another place in the cosmos, within the time-space continuum with which we are familiar. In the light of the new physics of Einstein and others, many are coming to see that heaven is a term for another dimension of existence. It need not be spatially removed from us at all, but may be as present on earth as it is anywhere else. When Jesus appeared and disappeared in the course of His post-resurrection ministry, He was simply stepping in and out of the invisible dimension where spiritual realities exist-heaven. Yet all the time He was in some sense on earth, for He said that He had not yet ascended to His Father.

While I admit that this may be somewhat speculative and mysterious, it is supported by several passages of Scripture. It simply implies that the church (consisting of believers with glorified bodies) will accompany the Lord in His behind-the-scenes directing of the events of the Tribulation. It is this same church that the apostle John sees under the symbol of a glorious city, coming from heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. The marriage supper of the Lamb will already have taken place in those invisible realms while the events of the Tribulation rage on earth.

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