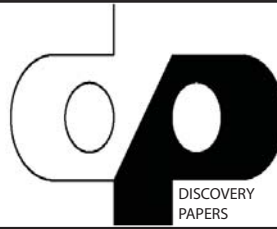


# THE DIGNITY OF LABOR

SERIES: BETWEEN THE TIMES



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1 & 2 Thessalonians  
Final Message  
Scott Grant  
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## *2 Thessalonians 3:6-18*

People in the Silicon Valley tend to spend a lot of time thinking about work. And it's no wonder, for we are at the technological capital of the world, and the world is becoming increasingly technological.

Then again, I remember a man I met a few years ago in a slum in Bangalore, India. He was hoping that a quarry would hire him to work for about \$1 a day to pick up rocks and move them onto a flatbed truck. He was afraid, however, that the manager would find out that he was HIV-positive and turn him away. He had no disability insurance to fall back on, no social safety net. His best hope was to work in sweltering conditions until AIDS made it impossible for him to do so anymore. He lived in the technological capital of India, but he was thinking about work differently than we do here.

How should we think about work? The apostle Paul says more about work in 1 and 2 Thessalonians than he does in any of his other letters. Let's begin with his most fulsome treatment, in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18.

An observation at the outset: Work encompasses more than just work for pay. If you're a student: that's work. Staying home with your kids: that's work. Looking for work: that's work. Volunteer work: that's work. John Montgomery, for example, led Beautiful Day for our church and several other churches, working virtually full-time from January to April, all for the love of the Gospel. Whether we're working for pay or not, we have a vocation, and a vocation encompasses all of life.

### **2 Thessalonians 3:6-18:**

**Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.<sup>7</sup> For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you,<sup>8</sup> nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and**

**day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.<sup>9</sup> It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.<sup>10</sup> For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.<sup>11</sup> For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.<sup>12</sup> Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.<sup>13</sup> As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.<sup>14</sup> If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.<sup>15</sup> Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.**

**<sup>16</sup>Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.**

**<sup>17</sup>I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.<sup>18</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.**

## **The problem of idleness**

In these verses, Paul addresses the problem of idleness: the refusal of some to work. This is not the first time that he has addressed this issue with the Thessalonians. Paul had already told them of "the tradition" concerning idleness and work. Moreover, we read that when Paul visited Thessalonica, he spoke to them about idleness and work. Furthermore, he encouraged them, in his first letter, to work (1 Thessalonians 4:11). Clearly, idleness was a problem in Thessalonica. Paul's concern is not with those who are willing to work but are, for whatever reason, unable to work. His concern is with those who are "not willing" to work, those who are defiantly idle.

In our day, it's not so easy to determine who is unwilling to work, who is, in fact, defiantly idle.

Suffice it to say that if you're wondering whether you're defiantly idle, if you care enough even to ask the question, you're probably not defiantly idle.

Paul does not say in his letters to the Thessalonians why certain people were unwilling to work. Therefore, as these letters come to us, they challenge whatever reasons we would put forth for slacking off. Some don't want to work because they're lazy. Some don't want to work because they'd rather do whatever they want with their time, pursuing avocations rather than vocations. Some don't want to work because they think they're better suited for a different kind of work. Some don't want to work because they don't find work "meaningful." Some don't want to work—or work hard—at particular jobs because they feel entitled to other jobs. Some who are spiritually minded don't want to work in so-called "secular" fields that are not clearly connected, in their minds, with the kingdom of God.

Inasmuch as Paul does not go into any of the reasons why some in Thessalonica were unwilling to work, we're left with the impression that the reasons don't matter. The reasons are just excuses.

In some ways, perhaps, we want too much out of work. M. Craig Barnes, a pastor and seminary professor, once asked his grandmother if his grandfather was fulfilled as a farmer:

*She was confused by the question. First I had to explain the concept to her. Finally she shrugged and said, "I don't know, honey. He was a farmer." That was the first time it hit me that he spent most of his life plowing dirt but never asking himself if this was what he wanted to do with his life. He farmed because he inherited the identity of farmer from the six generations of ancestors who lived on the same acreage. That now seems, well, quaint. We understand the pursuit of fulfillment all too well—it's pretty much our Holy Grail.<sup>1</sup>*

On the one hand, there's too much emphasis around here on being fulfilled in your work. On the other hand, there's not enough emphasis on what can and should be fulfilling in your work.

## Reasons for work

When God made humans in his image, he commanded them to "have dominion" over creation and to "subdue" the earth (Genesis 1:26-28). In other words, he commanded them, as his representatives, to bring the influence of heaven to earth. They were given a calling, a vocation—a job. For the first man, this involved working and keeping a garden (Genesis 2:15). When the first humans sinned, work became

more difficult, but it did not become unnecessary (Genesis 3:17-19). In fact, one could argue that the imperative to bring the influence of heaven to earth became even more important in a world that became suddenly resistant to such influence.

Why should people work? What's wrong with idleness? Theologically, work is connected to our humanity, having to do with our mandate to bring the influence of heaven to earth. Practically, at least five reasons for work emerge in Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians. There are many other biblical reasons for work, and we could spend much time in consideration of those reasons. The book of Proverbs, especially, has much to say about the dignity of labor. But these are the reasons that emerge in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians:

First, people should work to "earn their own living." Paul relates working to "brotherly love" in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12. Believers who refuse to work and instead live off the largess of others in the family of God demonstrate a lack of concern not only for those they are sponging off but also for those who can't find work or are unable to work and who would otherwise benefit from the community's resources. Both in 1 Thessalonians 2:9 and in 2 Thessalonians 3:8, Paul said one of the reasons he worked for a living was so that he "might not be a burden to any of you." Working for a living is a loving thing to do. Today, some people who are able to work but unwilling to work have figured out how to survive on government support.

Second, people should work because if they don't work, they will be more likely to fill up their time with less constructive activities. Paul has heard that some in Thessalonica were not "busy at work, but busybodies." With time on their hands, they meddled in affairs that weren't their business. Likewise, in 1 Timothy 5:13, Paul expressed concern that disobedient and idle widows had become "gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not."

Third, people should work because the reputation of the gospel is at stake. The idle in the church in Thessalonica were likely not only sponging off people in the church but also off people outside the church, for Paul encouraged the believers in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 to work so that they "may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one." People in the world work for a living, and if believers refuse to work and drain the resources of others, they send the wrong message about what it means to follow Jesus.

Fourth, people should work to set a positive example for others. Paul had a right to earn his living

from his apostolic work, but he declined to exercise his right in Thessalonica and instead earned his keep as a leather worker to give the Thessalonians an “example to imitate” (1 Corinthians 9:8-14). In essence, then, Paul worked at two jobs but only took money for one of them. Paul not only taught the Thessalonians to work, he also modeled what he was teaching.

Fifth, people should work because if they don't work, they could become negative examples to others in the church. Paul tells the Thessalonians, “As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good”—that is, do not grow weary in working for a living. Idleness, like any sin, can spread in a community. If the ground grows thorns and thistles, so to speak, and others have decided not to deal with the difficulty of work by simply not working, others may be inclined to follow their example.

## **Framing pictures**

Twenty-one years ago, I was looking for work as a pastor. I had spoken with some elders of Peninsula Bible Church about the prospects at their church, but they seemed to be in no hurry to make a decision. I felt I needed to do something other than look for work. I recognized that idleness wasn't good for me. So I called some friends who owned a frame shop and asked if they needed part-time help. They offered me a job framing pictures but could pay me only slightly more than minimum wage. Income wasn't a concern for me then; I simply needed to do something while I looked for full-time work. Still, at age thirty-six, I felt ashamed of this job.

But the frame shop grew on me. It was owned by a couple whose employees included a few unreliable teenagers. My friends valued my help and my companionship. We talked of life while laboring together. Working with wood reminded me of Jesus, who labored as a carpenter. While framing pictures that would decorate houses for years, I thought, “I'm bringing beauty to people's lives.” I learned about friendship, and about humility. I worked at the frame shop for four months before the elders at PBC invited me to join their pastoral staff. I'm thankful for the frame shop, and I'm thankful that the elders took their time, which allowed me to work at the frame shop.

## **Discipline the unwilling**

Idleness, then, properly understood, represents serious rebellion against God. Those who are able

to work but unwilling to work and instead live off the largess of others are disobedient to the very first biblical imperative, which involves bringing the influence of heaven to earth. For Paul, such serious rebellion called for a serious response. In fact, for those who have not heeded repeated instruction and warnings, he calls for a two-part response.

First, he says, “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”

When I was sixteen years old, I went on a weeklong work project with my church youth group. I had just joined the group, and I didn't know much about the Scriptures. At the work site, someone had posted 2 Thessalonians 2:10: “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.” I had never read that verse before, and I thought, “Whoa, they're serious about this!”

Again, Paul is not speaking about those who are unable to work or who can't find work; he's speaking about those who are unwilling to work. Paul is commanding the Thessalonian church to withhold even basic sustenance for the idle. If the church provided for the idle, they would be enabling sin, depriving people of a basic incentive for work: to earn one's food. Look at Proverbs 16:26: “A worker's appetite works for him; his mouth urges him on.” If you feed a person who is unwilling to work, you take away his appetite, which would otherwise motivate him to work.

Second, the believers in Thessalonica should “keep away from” and “have nothing to do with” those who are unwilling to work. Social separation was a primary means of correction in the early church. Whatever community one was a part of meant everything to people in the ancient world—and it still means everything to people in many parts of our world today. To be separated from one's community in any sense was to be separated from life. Paul actually wanted a shunned individual to “be ashamed.” He wanted them to feel hunger, and he wanted them to feel shame.

It's important to note that Paul advocates such measures not for the sake of punishment but for the sake of correction. His measures are redemptive, motivated by love. He reminds the church members that even a defiantly idle person is not an “enemy” but a “brother.” If repeated instruction and warnings won't bring an idle brother to his senses, then perhaps hunger and shame will do the trick. If one were to challenge Paul that such measures were overly harsh and unloving, he might respond by pointing out that such measures are necessary for such a harsh and unloving brother.

Correcting the defiantly idle in our time and place is not so straightforward. First, a church could refuse to provide sustenance for a defiantly idle person, but there are plenty of ways he can provide for himself without working. Second, a church could attempt to separate itself from a defiantly idle person, but that person could simply attach herself to another church or another community. In any event, we should not be afraid to be firm with the defiantly idle, both for their sake and for the sake of the community.

Paul's instructions about work in his Thessalonian letters are decidedly practical. In two other key passages, however, he gives a theological framework for work, applying, in the new age, God's commands to the first humans to work.

## Working for the Lord

In Colossians 3:23-24, Paul says, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ." Believers in Christ go to work to serve Christ, who has won for them an eternal inheritance—the new creation. What Christ has done for them motivates them as they go to work. For the believer, every field relates to the kingdom of God. Every job involves bringing the influence of heaven to earth. Note that God called the first man to be a gardener, not a preacher. Jesus was a carpenter before he was a preacher. Do we suppose that carpentry was any less of a spiritual enterprise for the Son of God than preaching? No, he served God as a carpenter, and he served God as a preacher. Whatever you do—as an engineer, as a teacher, as a gardener—has eternal significance.

I was a journalist for eleven years before I became a pastor, but I didn't change because I viewed the pulpit as superior to the newsroom. I changed because I felt God calling me to change. In fact, I wrestled with the decision for long months, trying to stay in a field where believers were needed. Finally, though, I surmised that God was leading me elsewhere.

Next Sunday, Pat Gelsinger, the CEO of VMware, who is a strong believer, will be our guest preacher. (I suppose it goes without saying that he's a strong believer; we wouldn't invite him to preach here if he weren't.) Pat sees his work as a thoroughly spiritual endeavor. In fact, he calls himself "the senior pastor of a 17,000-person multinational corporation."

Brother Lawrence, a lay brother in a Carmelite monastery in 17th century Paris, believed that "common business," no matter how mundane or routine, could be a medium of God's love. He did not consider it "needful that we should have great things to do," adding, "We can do little things for God," adding, "It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for love of God."<sup>2</sup>

Or, listen to the words of the supervisor of a moving crew:

*Moving is hard for most people. It's a very vulnerable time for them. People are nervous about going to a new community, and about having strangers pack their most precious possessions. I think God wants me to treat my customers with love and make them feel that I care about their things and their life. God wants me to help make their changes go smoothly. If I can be happy about it, maybe they can be, too.<sup>3</sup>*

## Your labor is not in vain

In 1 Corinthians 15:58, Paul says, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." As we have seen, the work of the Lord is any work done for the Lord. Many people aspire to have a great impact. People around here, especially, want to "change the world." In light of the resurrection of Christ and the future resurrection of Christ's people, Paul says that one's labor "in the Lord" is not in vain—that it has an impact, not only in this world but also, more importantly, in the next world, which is eternal. Everything done for the sake of Christ in this world will matter in the new world. Moreover, everything done for the sake of Christ in this world will be enhanced in the new world. A believer's body will be enhanced; likewise, a believer's work will be enhanced. The loaves and fish we serve up in this world, so to speak, will be multiplied in the next world. Or, in light of Jesus' parable of the mustard seed, everything small done for the kingdom of God will grow to be big (Mark 4:30-32). (See my treatment of that parable: [www.pbc.org/messages/seeds-of-significance](http://www.pbc.org/messages/seeds-of-significance).)

Therefore, the person who goes to work cleaning toilets at the Motel 6 and offers up a humble prayer at the outset of the day does more to change the world than the prayerless CEO of the most influential Silicon Valley company. The prayer and the work of the person who cleans toilets impacts eternity.

A warning, however: God makes something of your work, but you don't work to take satisfaction in your impact. You aspire to be faithful, and you let God do what he will with your faithfulness: "Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2). We must at almost all costs guard against pride.

A friend once asked C.S. Lewis if he was ever aware that he was increasing his reputation by writing books.

*He said in a low, still voice, and with the deepest and most complete humility I've ever observed in anyone, 'One cannot be too careful not to think of it.' The house, the garden, the whole universe seemed hushed for a moment, and then we began talking again"<sup>4</sup>*

We can't be too careful not to think about our impact, lest we become prideful.

## No retirement

A final note about retirement: there is no retirement in the kingdom of God. What you do may change, but the original imperative still applies: continue bringing the influence of heaven to earth, if only through prayer.

After Charlie Luce retired from General Electric, he continued to serve as an elder of this church. After retiring as an elder, and after his wife unexpectedly died, he asked the Lord, "What do you want to do with the life?" He discerned that the Lord wanted him to disciple young men, and that's exactly what he did for the next twenty years or so, right up until his death in 2013 at the age of ninety-six. Chi Wong, a member of our church, was able to visit Charlie for a few minutes in a hospital in South Carolina, a few days before he died—and there he was on his deathbed, encouraging a younger man. Charlie retired from General Electric and he retired from the elder board—but he didn't retire. He continued his work in the kingdom of God right up to the end.

Jack and Ione MacKay have gone on all of our missions trips to India, even into their eighties. Moreover, Jack, who worked as an educator, continues to serve on the board at the King's Academy, blessing that school with the wisdom that comes from the riches of his experience.

Serve Christ and labor in the Lord, even up to your last breath.

## Moving rocks

I don't know what came of the man I met in India who was hoping to get a job moving rocks, but writing

about him makes me remember a job that I once had moving rocks. Well, I'm not sure you'd call it a job: I went to Ensenada, Mexico, for a week to do volunteer work at a Christian camp. The leader of the camp assigned me and another man to move rocks from one pile to another pile. To be honest, I was not thrilled about the assignment. I really didn't want to spend all day moving rocks, but I agreed. I motivated myself with reminders that the kingdom of God was being served.

The next morning, the leader of the camp approached me and the other man rather sheepishly. He said that a mistake had been made. He now realized that it had not been necessary to move the rocks from the first pile to the second pile. In fact, it was now necessary to move the rocks from the second pile back to the first pile. Uh, what? Yes, that's right; we spent the second day moving the rocks back to the pile we moved them from the first day.

What were we doing? Now I think I know. The first day, as we moved the rocks from the first pile to the second pile, were bringing the influence of heaven to earth. The second day, as we moved the rocks from the second pile back to the first pile, we were bringing the influence of heaven to earth. At the very least, something heavenly—something eternal—was happening in me. What happened over the course of those two days has something to do with the man I am today. Moreover, it has something to do with the man I will be forever.

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Barnes, M. Craig. *The Pastor as Minor Poet*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009. Print.

<sup>2</sup>Brother Lawrence, *Practicing the Presence of God* (???).]

<sup>3</sup>Salkin, Jeffrek K.. *Being God's Partner: How to Find the Hidden Link Between Spirituality and Your Work*. Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994). Print.

<sup>4</sup>Hooper, Walter. *Introduction to The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1975, 1980.]