

The Christian Work Ethic In Light Of 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

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Along with such Scriptural teachings as the position of women in the church and home, the six day creation, and the personhood of unborn infants, the so-called “Protestant work ethic” stands as one of modern society’s favorite whipping boys. Capitalism with all its rampant materialism often has been blamed on the Christian emphasis on work, especially as expounded by the Reformed churches.

Among the widely accepted conventions of modern historiography few have been more tenaciously held or more strongly criticized than the assumption that Protestantism, particularly in its Calvinist form, emerged in the sixteenth century as the ideology of a “rising middle class.” Like most well-established, conventionalized forms of thought this one has been difficult to displace in recent historical thinking because it has for long been supported by the researches of a number of eminent and able scholars whose conclusions are reinforced and seemingly confirmed by the verisimilitude of an observable historical connection. Calvinism, after all, did have its beginnings in the city-state of Geneva; and as it spread across Northern and Western Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it seemed to grow best in those areas where commercial activity and urban life were most flourishing. Nothing has seemed more natural, therefore, than to assume that there must have been a close, nexus-like affinity between Calvinism and that expanding capitalism which has always been regarded as the peculiar economic attribute of the European bourgeoisie.ⁱ

Yet for all that has been written of the possible relations between the churches and economics, it is surprising how little investigation there has been into what the Bible itself says about work.ⁱⁱ Though hardly definitive, this essay strives to capture much of the spirit and flavor of what God’s Word teaches about human labor. This will be done on the basis of one of Scripture’s more famous work passages, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13. We shall not treat these verses in the order in which they appear in Scripture, but topically under four main headings: 1. Work! 2. St. Paul’s Example. 3. Beware of idleness. 4. Persevere.

Work!

“For even when we were with you, this we command you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat” (verse 10).ⁱⁱⁱ

These are probably the first words that come to mind when we think of what the Bible says about work. We might say that 2 Thessalonians 3:10 is to the Scriptural doctrine of work what John 3:16 is to the Scriptural teaching of salvation.

It may surprise many to learn that this noted verse on labor comes from an epistle which is directly or indirectly devoted to the subject of working for a living. Paul is not simply inserting a proverb into his letter, as if to say, “By the way, remember that you should work for a living.” Rather, the verse focuses on a problem in the Thessalonian congregation which had deep theological roots. Certain of the Thessalonian Christians were doing nothing except standing around and talking. Paul calls them “busybodies” (verse 11). This situation had arisen because they thought that “the day of Christ is at hand” (2:2). Since, as they thought, Christ would soon return, why bother to work?

In answer to this misconception, Paul responded, “Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition...”(2:3ff). So we see that Paul’s whole discussion of the Antichrist is closely linked to the Thessalonians’ problem with work. This is a good example of how the entire Christian faith is woven together. To begin pulling one strand soon leads to another, and another, and another.

Not until Chapter 3, however, does St. Paul directly confront the work problem. He reminds his readers that “we commanded you” to work. When Paul and Silas were in Thessalonica they had told the people to work, and in his first letter to them Paul restated that directive, “And that ye study to be quiet,...to work with your own hands, as we commanded you” (1 Thessalonians 4:11).

The Authorized Version’s “would not work” does not convey Paul’s meaning as well as the NIV’s “will not work.” The Apostle is saying, “If a man refuses to work, he should not eat either.” These are strong words. They illustrate the emphasis that Paul places on the importance of work.

If a person can not work, of course these words do not apply. To the sick, naked, hungry, stranger and imprisoned the Christian can never turn his back. As Jesus tells us, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40).

In stating the necessity of work for those who are able, Paul does not just give his own opinion. He writes by inspiration. Moreover, this attitude toward labor is reflected throughout the rest of Scripture as well as in the Pauline epistles. The word “work” occurs hundreds of times in the Bible, referring to the action of God as well as man.^{iv} “It is clear from the interchangeable use of certain words to indicate God’s activity and man’s that work is itself a God-ordained thing.”^v

Throughout the Bible we find many commendable examples of men and women working hard and faithfully. We think of such people as Jacob working for Laban, Ruth in the fields of Boaz, the rebuilders of Jerusalem’s walls, and the ideal wife of Proverbs 31. The Bible also includes many exhortations to work. Numerous of these commands are found in the book of Proverbs where they frequently stand in poetical antithesis against the *sin* of laziness. We shall discuss this at length later in the essay.

When Paul says, “If any would not work, neither should he eat”, he is not saying that work *per se* produces its reward. Food, clothing, money and all other material goods are *gifts* from God. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). Or, as the Psalmist put it, “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 24:1). Human effort or labor is merely the channel through which the Lord gives of His fullness to mankind. With his penetrating insight Martin Luther saw this truth:

[All these activities] are our Lord God's masks (*Larven*); beneath these He chooses to be hidden and to do everything. Had Gideon not co-operated and taken the field against Midian, the Midianites would not have been defeated. Yet God was able to smite them without Gideon. No doubt He could create children without man and woman, but He does not intend to do so. Rather He joins man and woman to make it look as if man and woman do the procreating. Yet He, hidden under this mask, is the one who does it. They say: (*Dat Deus omne bonum, sed non per cornua taurum*). God bestows every good thing; but you must "pitch in" and "take the bull by the horns," that is, you must work and supply God with a reason and a covering.^{vi}

Although people receive God's blessings through work, Paul and the other holy writers do not specify any particular profession, as long as it is honest labor. We can see this from St. Luke's account of John the Baptist's dealings with the publicans and soldiers.

Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, "Master, what shall we do?" And he said unto them, "Exact no more than that which is appointed you." And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, "And what shall we do?" And he said unto them, "Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:12-14)

Scripture does, however, implicitly warn against work which glorifies the laborer rather than the Giver of gifts. This is a danger especially in the so-called "creative" professions. Artists, writers and thinkers ought to remember that even the products of their genius are from God. In his book *The Biblical Doctrine of Work* Alan Richardson has summed up the Scriptural view:

Indeed, there is throughout the Bible an underlying suspicion of anything approaching admiration of "the works of men's hands." This results from the ever-present danger of idolatry, the worship of the works of men's hands: "their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands." ...Admiration of the creative faculty in man may lead to a non-biblical humanism which exalts the creature rather than the Only-Creator. The biblical writers will have none of it.^{vii}

Nevertheless, protection against such humanism lies not in the ostrich's position of burying one's head in the sand and ignoring the arts. Various church bodies have taken this position all too often. And Christians have been the poorer for it. Rather the antidote is Scripture itself: "Do all to the glory of God" (I Corinthians 10:31).^{viii}

St. Paul's Example

"For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an example unto you to follow us" (verses 7-9).

Although applicable to everyone, these verses are especially appropriate to all who, like Paul, devote their entire lives and energies to the propagation of the Gospel. For if ever there was a man who spent himself for His Savior, it was St. Paul.

In holding himself as an example, the great Apostle is not boasting. Quite to the contrary, Paul was merely showing that he, too, was under the Lord's will.

There is no manifestation of pride behind the statement that the Thessalonians must be imitators of the writers but quite the opposite: teachers and pupils, preachers and members are placed on the same level, under the same obedience to the doctrine.^{ix}

There are, then, several lessons we might take to heart from Paul's humble example. For one thing, Paul's intensity was a wonder. He labored "day and night." Such steady devotion to his work was not at all fanatical. It was not workaholism.^x It was Scriptural. In working regularly and consistently Paul was a true son of the Sinaitic Covenant. As Prof. John Murray has stated:

The stress laid upon the six days of labour [in Exodus 20:9] needs to be duly appreciated. The divine ordinance is not simply that of labour; it is labour with a certain constancy. There is indeed respite from labour, the respite of one whole day every recurring seventh day. The cycle of respite is provided for, but there is also the cycle of labour. And the cycle of labour is as irreversible as the cycle of rest. The law of God cannot be violated with impunity. We can be certain that a great many of our physical and economic ills proceed from failure to observe the weekly day of rest. But we can also be quite sure that a great many of our economic ills arise from our failure to recognize the sanctity of six days of labour. Labour is not only a duty; it is a blessing. And, in like manner, six days of labour are both a duty and a blessing. If this principle were firmly established in our thinking, then the complications and hypocrisies often associated with the demand for a five-day week would not have so readily afflicted our economy, and moral degeneration would not have proceeded at the pace we have witnessed.^{xi}

Although we can not agree that a five-day week borders on iniquity (for we are not bound by the Sinaitic Covenant), there is much to be said for regular and persistent work. Paul himself sets the example.

Furthermore, Paul's working "with labor and travail" demonstrates he understood well that beautiful verse from the Preacher, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest" (Ecclesiastes 9:10). When the night of death comes, it is too late to go back and finish what was left undone. The Christian should make the most of every day. Many a clock-watching laborer who lazily goes through the motions day after day could learn from Paul's zeal.

Finally, modern preachers can learn that it is alright to hold a job on the side. Though Paul had the "power" to live entirely from his preaching (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:14), he did not make use of that power. Instead he lived from his skill as a tent-maker. As a matter of fact, it was expected of rabbis of Paul's day that "each must acquire a trade and support himself by honest labor."^{xiii} Jesus himself was a carpenter by trade (see Mark 6:3).

This is not to say that modern pastors and teachers should all begin "moonlighting." The complexities and demands of modern society make this practice more detrimental than

beneficial. For instance, modern theologians are going to have to spend more time with their Hebrew and Greek studies than Paul did. To him they were living languages; today it requires long hours to “keep up on” them. Furthermore, the Apostle to the Gentiles began churches in completely new territories. Unconverted heathen could hardly be expected to have an immediate desire to support a missionary in their midst.^{xiii} Nor did Paul and many other early preachers in “the present distress” have families to care for. Imagine having a full time job, plus a family of four or six, in addition to a church of 1000 souls to serve! So unless circumstances force it, Paul himself probably would not recommend that preachers today hold a job on the side. As a matter of history, when in Corinth “Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching” (Acts 18:5, NIV; see also 2 Corinthians 11:9).

Ministers can still benefit from Paul’s example in this area. Just as he did not want to be “chargeable,” so ministers of the Word today should make sure that they do not burden those who support them. Preachers should give them their money’s worth and much more by faithful, Paul-like service.

Beware Of Idleness

“For we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us... For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread” (verses 6, 11, 12).

All the world is so constituted that if a man can avoid work, he does so; and yet he wants his share of enjoyment. As the heathen poet says: *Ingenium est hominum a labore proclive ad libidinem*. (It is characteristic of all human beings to incline from work to pleasure). All people like glory and possessions; everybody wants to rise in the world and aims at a prominent position. But when they are there and feel the work and worry it entails, they soon become disgusted and do not continue; for they sought nothing-but their pleasure and ease.^{xiv}

These words of Dr. Luther remind us that the “busybodies” in Thessalonica were merely doing what comes naturally—avoiding work. They were following an old proverb, quoted with irony by Luther, “Wait until a fried chicken flies into your mouth.”^{xv}

Yet it was no laughing matter. Idleness is not to be shrugged off lightly.

The book of Proverbs points out numerous disastrous results from this sin. It leads to shame: “He that gathereth in summer is a wise son: but he that sleepeth in harvest is a son that causeth shame” (Proverbs 10:5). Laziness also results in poverty: “Love not sleep, lest thou come to poverty: open thine eyes, and thou shalt be satisfied with bread” (Proverbs 20:13). Another result of idleness is decay: “I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; and, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down” (Proverbs 24: 30,31). Sloth can even lead to death: “The desire of the slothful killeth him: for his hands refuse to labour” (Proverbs 21:25). Because of all its terrible results, which even common sense can see, to continue in idleness is a sign of stupidity: “He that tilleth his land shall be satisfied with bread: but he that followeth vain persons is void of understanding” (Proverbs 12:11).

But of all the destructive results of idleness, the worst is that which Paul described to the Thessalonians. Like any other unrepented sin, it can result in separation from the Church of Christ and loss of one's soul.

In order to emphasize this seriousness, St. Paul told the congregation to "withdraw" from those "walking disorderly." Though still regarded as brothers, the idle Thessalonians were to be kept from the Lord's Supper and the agape. For "these were the great rites in which the congregational spiritual brotherhood expressed itself."^{xvi} This *status confessionis* was a powerful warning to those who persisted in their sin. In writing to Timothy, St. Paul also expressed the spiritual nature of sloth, "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1 Timothy 5:8).

Since idleness is a spiritual problem as well as material, its solution is also spiritual. "By our Lord Jesus Christ" such idlers were to return to work. By Christ's authority Paul could give the command to work, since it is Jesus' will.

There is, however, more involved than that in the phrase "by our Lord Jesus Christ." All Christian work is to be done for Jesus. It is the love of Christ that motivates and compels believers (see 2 Corinthians 5:14). Although work after the Fall into sin is done under God's curse and in the sweat of the brow, for the new man work again takes on an Eden-like quality. The man of faith has been "buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Thus even the simplest chore can be done to Christ's glory. Paul refers to this when he speaks of working "with quietness." After all, what is quietness but submission to Christ's will?

When work is done for Christ, the worker has an automatic safeguard against getting caught in the "rat race" and chasing after riches. This is true since Scripture teaches us to do all for Jesus, but never for money as an end in itself. For that matter, all secular occupations are really secondary to the Christian's first calling as a disciple.

But it must surely mean that being a doctor or a bricklayer or a dean of a cathedral is only a secondary form of 'work' for a Christian, just as being a tent-maker was a secondary—though deliberately accepted form of work for St. Paul (Acts 18:3). Our secular occupations are to be regarded not as ends in themselves but as means to the end of the Gospel.^{xvii}

It is interesting to see what happens when this is overlooked and Paul's command to work is separated from its Christian motivation. In the Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 1936, Joseph Stalin wrote, "In the U.S.S.R. work is the duty of every able-bodied citizen, according to the principle: 'He who does not work, neither shall he eat.'^{xviii} What a world of difference lies between working for a loving Savior and working for a dictatorial atheist state!

It is also interesting to see what happens when neither the Holy Scriptures nor a powerful state motivate people to work. Then more and more people feel no pangs of conscience or fear as they live comfortably off the welfare of their benevolent, but weakening society's economy. The United States welfare system was designed to help the needy, but it has often become the livelihood of the lazy.

So it is that the Christian work ethic can be implemented only in light of the entire Christian faith. Otherwise perversions and corruptions result.

Persevere

“*But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing*” (verse 13).

St. Paul has commanded the Thessalonians to work. He has pointed out how labor must be done for Christ. And now he urges the faithful and steadfast Thessalonians—“ye” in contrast to “them”—not to weary.

When faithful workers see others who seem to coast idly along on a bed of roses, they may become discouraged. But remember the Lord exhorts us to persevere.

St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, “It is one thing to see the land of peace from a wooded ridge...and another to tread the road that leads to it.” The rugged road to our land of peace is a way of toil and sweat, tears and frequent disappointments. Yet our Lord himself has traveled this way. The Apostle Paul and saints of old have walked it. Now we follow their example. We persevere.

Exhortations. Examples. We find plenty of both in Scripture—and more. God’s Word gives us the very strength to carry on, to follow its exhortations and examples. Without this divine power, we are bound to become discouraged and bitter as we labor, especially as we work in His vineyard. Without His strength how easily we slip into merely going through the motions.

But as we are refreshed by Word and Sacrament, we carry on with renewed dedication and zeal. With eyes focused on heaven and the glory Christ has won for us, we move onward, doing the tasks at hand to the best of our ability.

And so, dear brothers, do not weary. Work for the Savior...until earthly work is done.

ⁱ Sidney A. Burrell, *The Role of Religion in Modern European History*, MacMillan Co., New York, 1964, pp. 37-38.

ⁱⁱ The Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library contains but two books dealing extensively with the Bible and work; they are the books by Richardson and Murray cited in this essay. Douglas’ *New Bible Dictionary* cites only the same two works plus Calvin’s Institutes in its bibliography under the topic “Work.”

ⁱⁱⁱ All Bible quotes are from the King James Version.

^{iv} Cf. J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1965, pp. 1337f.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 1337.

^{vi} Ewald M. Plass, ed., *What Luther Says*, Vol. III, Concordia Publ. House, St. Louis, Missouri, 1959, pp. 1494-1495.

^{vii} Alan Richardson, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work*, SCM Press Ltd., London, 1963, p. 17.

^{viii} For a fine discussion of art from a Christian viewpoint, confer Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1973.

^{ix} R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, Augsburg Publ. House, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1964, p. 458.

^x For a treatment of this subject, see Wayne Oates, *Confessions of a Workaholic*, Abingdon, Nashville, Tennessee, 1978.

^{xi} John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1964, p. 83.

^{xii} Richardson, *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

^{xiii} To this day, of course, missionaries receive outside support until a mission congregation has grown enough in size and understanding to pay their salaries.

^{xiv} Plass, *Op. cit.*, p. 1493.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 1495.

^{xvi} Lenski, *Op. cit.*, p. 455.

^{xvii} Richardson, *Op. cit.*, p. 35.

^{xviii} Joseph Stalin as quoted in John Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, Little, Brown & Co., Boston, 1955.