

The Dignity of Work

Labor Day: for many Americans it marks the end of summer, the beginning of school, and Fall sports. Do we even think about work or labor? Labor Day as a public holiday was first recognized in Oregon in 1887 and became a Federal holiday when Pres. Grover Cleveland signed it into law in 1894. It honors the American labor movement and the contributions that workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of the country. Where would we be if people didn't work?

But how do people feel about work today? Is work just a necessary evil, something to be avoided? Isn't leisure the goal of life? Blessed are those whose work is not drudgery and who find fulfillment in what they do.

The Bible contains insight on our labors and those insights may allow us to find more joy in work than we thought. From the beginning **biblical people have known that work is necessary for survival ...by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food... Gen. 3:19.** That's a fact of life after Adam and Eve fell from grace in the Garden of Eden. Echoing this truth St. Paul said *...we gave you this rule: 'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat,'* 2 Thess. 3:10. Yet the Bible tells us that there can be more to our work than simply survival. Though we live in a fallen world, **our work can be redeemed for God's purposes.** Let's look at that by reflecting on two verses from the Bible: Ecclesiastes 9:10 and Colossians 3:17.

Blossom Where You're Planted

The reflections of Qoheleth – the teacher – have come down to us in the O. T. book of Ecclesiastes. His is a kind of existential (we are in this world without our prior consent and it is up to us to create our life's meaning) view of human life, with a touch of cynicism, as he considers the vanity of so much of what we strive for. Recognizing that we all must face death at some point, he attempts to wrest some meaning from his days on earth. Speaking of work he says, **Whatever your hand finds to do, do it... Ecclesiastes 9:10a.** Of course, this means do good things, not things counter to God's instructions.

Most of recognize that there is an unpredictable nature to life. It's good to plan your days, but no matter how well planned your day may be, something that needs doing unexpectedly "turns up." When it does, and you can do it, then just do it. Many times, this is your occasion for discovering God and how to be His servant. In the same way, **take hold of the ordinary responsibilities of life and just do them.** We can sit in front of the TV and think about cleaning the bathroom, or finishing that project in the garage, or completing a term paper; but

if we don't get up and do it, all the wishful thinking in the world isn't worth a hoot.

The fact is, most of the things that need to be done are ordinary, repetitive, and sometimes draining. But left undone, your life, your home, your church, the world is a bit poorer. Many of those tedious, little-noticed jobs are the building blocks for something greater, and they give life to others. Consistently doing these things often prepares us for greater things. **Actions always speak louder than intentions.**

[Someone has to clear the table. Someone has to take out the trash. Someone has to walk the dog and clean up the poop. Someone has to pay the bills. Someone has to get to the office early. Someone has to check the invoices. Someone has to prepare the lesson plans. Someone has to do their homework. Someone has to be on call this weekend. Someone has to stay late and lock up. Someone has to teach Sunday School. Someone has to run the soundboard during the second service. Someone has to go to band practice. Someone has to file the papers. Someone has to review the loan application. Someone has to drive the carpool on Thursday.]

And so it goes. That's what life is—a whole bunch of duties large and small that "someone" has to do. We all have work to do, we all have chores, jobs, responsibilities, assignments in life. No one gets a free ride. You can't stay in bed forever.

If you're bored or depressed look around – there's something that needs to be done. Better yet, **find someone you can help**. Even at that boring job you can look around and say, "How can I help?" or simply pitch in where needed. And you know what? When you serve others, you are building better character – something often lost on those who have those things done for them.

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I was introduced to work at home through chores (I really hated cleaning house on Saturday mornings!), and then on a relative's farm in the summers. My first hourly job, where I had to report to a boss (who wasn't a family member), was at a small restaurant near our home. I walked there Friday and Saturday afternoons, bussed dishes through the dinner hour, then finished up washing dishes after closing time. That job taught me responsibility and the dignity that comes from work. There I earned my own money. I didn't have to ask my parents for money to go out to a movie with friends or buy a record etc. For this kid it was a big step toward independence and responsibility. Do you remember your first job?

Only as I've aged, have I given thought to what that job, and all subsequent work, has meant. It seems to me that **we are a result of God's work, and our work is a reflection of His**. We provide, and create good, and there is purpose in work. Work is a part of God's design for us. There is a profound spiritual

component to our work. We have more than material needs **... work for food that ... endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval, John 6:27.**

At my first full-time job after college, I recall the postman who came to our office every day counting the days until he retired. His last day came and as he made his rounds there was a little celebration at each stop. I saw him a few months later in town and asked how retirement was going. His reply: "I hate it." He missed his daily purpose and he missed seeing everyone on his route. Having some meaningful work to do is necessary to thriving and finding joy in life.

It is a very dangerous thing to deprive people of work. Slavery is insidious because it goes against God's will, not only because it deprives people of their freedom, but also because it robs them of the fruit of their labor. Slavery is monstrous theft. Any system or practice that provides all that is needed to live, deprives people of their dignity of providing for themselves and family. That too is a monstrous theft. Isn't part of raising children teaching them responsibility to provide for themselves? Contentment in life, happiness, comes not mostly from leisure, but from accomplishment and victory. There is dignity in your honest labor to provide for your family and you contribute beyond family by bringing goods, or services, or joy to people in your community.

Work With Passion

"Earnestness" is a word we don't use much nowadays, but it perfectly describes how Christians ought to approach life. Life is a gift from the Almighty – not to be squandered or abused. **Honorable work contributes to a life well lived.** *Of that work your hand finds to do ... Do it with all your might,* Ecclesiastes 9:10b. Enter into your work with enthusiasm as working for the Lord. At the very least you'll bring some joy to co-workers.

From the biblical point of view all work is noble if it is done for the glory of God. **Even the most mundane task is worthwhile and can serve God.** I had another part-time job when growing up, this one at a drug store. The boss assigned me to clean a storage room that was a cluttered mess. He was shocked when he came by a bit later and found that I had completely emptied that room and begun neatly restocking it with all the items that belonged there and setting aside things that didn't. My thinking was do the job right and make it complete. Fortunately, he commended me for my efforts. **If you do your work well, you honor God.** The Bible says: ***And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, Colossians 3:17a.*** Maybe we'd all be more careful with our words and actions if we thought his name was attached to our endeavors. Well, His name is attached to our words and deeds! We're called "Christians" after all. People see us before they see Jesus.

Okay some days you don't feel like working. You think I don't have days like that? Long ago I repeated to myself: It is faithfulness, not feelings, that counts in the long run. If work was always fun, it would be spelled F-U-N. That verse from Ecclesiastes doesn't say, "Do it with all your might if you feel like it." Those who say, "when I feel good, I'll do it," rarely get much done. But those who say, "When I do it, I'll feel good," are tremendous producers. Do it right, do it well, do it with enthusiasm, then leave it in God's hands.

Maybe you're in a job you don't like because you made some poor choices along the way, or necessity demanded it, or the job changed. It's okay to look for another job. But in the meantime, honor God, do your work each day as unto the Lord.

Life Is Short

Every one of us here knows quite well where this journey of life takes us. Along the way we may experience great adventure, challenges, joys, disappointments. Still, no matter what we've been through the outcome is the same. Maybe that's why we avoid reading the last part of this verse from Ecclesiastes: *For in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom, Ecclesiastes 9:10c.* Yeah, not a verse we're likely to see on a greeting card.

Sooner than we think, our moment in the sun will be over. **Life is not a dress rehearsal.** Do good now – seize the day! Don't wait for a tragedy to realize the brevity of life and who and what is really important. Do not procrastinate lest the years slip away from you. Life is shorter than we realize, so do your best work today, enjoy the simple blessings, love one another.

Ecclesiastes also has this to say: *He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart, Eccl. 3:11.* We all leave something behind from our time on earth. Legacy is what you leave behind that lives on in others. A lasting legacy begins with a vertical gaze – fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (Heb. 12:2). As we grow in the grace of our Lord Jesus, we will tend to focus on the things that matter most – eternal things. A lasting legacy includes a horizontal gaze – we are not concerned solely with our own lives, but with the lives of others as well. **Legacy is not about yourself; it's about making a positive difference for others.** It's not what you get that makes a good life, but what you give. Seize the day in acts that benefit others.

There is an old Quaker saying: "I expect to pass through the world but once. Any good therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

Go back and read Eccl. 9, especially verses 4-9, and you'll find that the writer urges us to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. You're going to die soon

but... *whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope (v.4) ... eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works (v. 7), dress nicely and be clean (v. 8), enjoy life with your spouse and the pleasures of married life (v. 9). These things are gifts from God. This is not a call to hedonism or full-time leisure. It is a call to enjoy the simple pleasures of life, grateful for the daily blessings of God.*

Cultivate a thankful heart at work, at home, at school, at church, and you will enjoy life more and bring more joy to those around you. Recognize the dignity of your work – even in retirement - and how you can honor God through it. You don't get to choose how you're going to die, or when. But you can choose how you're going to live now. You can live with gratitude and get better. Or you can live with envy and get bitter. It's up to you.

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him, Col. 3:17.