

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series through 1 Thessalonians, which was a letter written by a leader in the early church named Paul to a church in Thessalonica that he had been instrumental in starting around the year 49 AD. Paul and his fellow missionaries had been driven out of Thessalonica by a mob of angry Jews who found his message about Jesus being Lord to be blasphemous. And 2-3 years later, Paul has not been able to return to Thessalonica, so he sends Timothy, one of his fellow missionaries, who brings back a report about how the Thessalonians are doing and what issues they are facing. In response to Timothy's report, Paul sends this letter. In the first section of this letter, Paul reminds them of the gospel and of his love for them, and he defends himself against his critics' accusations and slander. In the next section, which we began last week, Paul transitions to instructions about how to live as a Christian. He mainly focuses on three areas of life: sex, work, and death. Last week we looked at God's vision for our sexuality, and this morning we'll look at God's vision for our work. In addition to the passage from 1 Thessalonians 4, I'm going to read one verse from chapter 5, as well as a section from his second letter to the Thessalonians, as this issue of work appeared to be a recurring issue in this church:

1 Thessalonians 4:1,9-12 - Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more...⁹ Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.¹⁰ And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.¹¹ Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you,¹² so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

1 Thessalonians 5:14 - And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 - In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you,⁸ nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.⁹ We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow.¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."¹¹ We hear that some among you

are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. ¹² Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.

As we meditate on these passages, there are three things I want to say this morning about God's vision for our work. And if you want to explore this topic further, a good book to read is *"Every Good Endeavor: Connecting your work to God's work"* by Tim Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf.

1) God gives each of us meaningful work to do

Last week I traced how Genesis begins with a marriage between a man and a woman, and Revelation ends with the marriage of Jesus and His bride, the church. You can do the same with work. In the beginning, God gives Adam meaningful labor.

Genesis 1:26-28 - *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."*

Meaningful labor is a part of God's good creation. Adam will not be sitting around doing nothing, but will be working, stewarding the world God has given him. It was the fall that turned work into toil:

Genesis 3:17-19 - *To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. ¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."*

Because of the fall, what was once intended to be part of a purposeful, meaningful life has become a source of pain and frustration. But it is critical to realize that work was actually part of God's good original design for our lives.

And in the end, in paradise, work is still there:

Revelation 22:5 - *There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.*

In the end, we will reign with God over the new heavens and new earth. Whatever that looks like, the implication seems to be that work and labor will be redeemed, and we will rule over this perfect recreated world with God forever.

As much as we may hate work and want to sit around doing nothing, the reality is that work is a part of God's good creation, that God has given each of us meaningful work to do, and so having purpose and responsibility in life is a huge part of what it means to live a meaningful life. **The Christian word for work is vocation, from the Latin "Vocare,"** to call, which can be defined as "a divine call to God's service or to the Christian life" or "a function or station in life to which one is called by God." The word vocation communicates the idea that there is someone else who has called you to your station in life, whether it is as a student, a homemaker, an engineer, a teacher, a grandparent, or anything else.

God has good works for us to do:

Ephesians 2:10 - *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

This verse is often twisted to make it about your self-esteem, but it is really about purpose. God has saved you for a purpose. We are saved by grace, but we are saved for good works. We are not saved by our works, but our works do matter as part of being God's witness to our neighbors and our world. As Paul put it in the passage we just read:

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 - *Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, ¹² so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.*

Or, as Jesus put it:

Matthew 5:14-16 – *"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let*

your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

God has good works, a vocation, a calling, set aside for you, prepared in advance for you to do. That includes loving your spouse if you are married, raising your kids if you have them, serving your neighbor, doing your job well, and so on. You were created to do good works. God gives each of us meaningful work to do.

In Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians, he speaks out sternly against those who are idle, lazy, who have an irresponsible attitude towards work, exhorting them to work with their hands and earn a living.

1 Thessalonians 5:14 - *And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.*

2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 - *In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. ⁹ We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." ¹¹ We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. ¹² Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.*

Paul is not talking about unemployment – those who want to work but can not find it. He is talking about those who refuse to work for whatever reason, and who as a result are dependent upon others for their livelihood. This idleness and the dependence upon others that results, is contrary to God’s design, that we would all walk in the meaningful work He has given us to do. Consider a parable Jesus told when he was talking about his second coming:

Matthew 25:14-30 - *"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. ¹⁶ The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. ¹⁷ So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. ¹⁸ But the man who had received the one*

talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹ "After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' ²¹ "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' ²² "The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.' ²³ "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' ²⁴ "Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵ So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' ²⁶ "His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷ Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with **interest.** ²⁸ "'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. ²⁹ For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. ³⁰ And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

As I understand it, Jesus is telling us that He has given us each gifts, abilities, resources, talents. And we are to put those to work, using them in service to the master and His kingdom. And in the parable, those who put them to work are praised and put in charge of many things when the master returns. But the one who hides the talent loses even the one talent he had. Laziness and idleness are sins because they result in taking the gifts and resources God has entrusted to you and wasting them.

2) A central purpose of work is serving your neighbor

As I already mentioned, Paul equates working with loving your neighbor because when you earn a living, you are not dependent upon anyone, not a burden to anyone else. Evidently there were some taking advantage of the Christian community's generosity by the way they did not earn their own living but needed to rely on other people's money and resources in order to live. Paul, on the other hand, reminds the Thessalonians that they worked day and night in order not to be a burden to the people there. Some of you need to take this to heart, to take

responsibility for your lives, to get a job and move out of your parents' house. Or work so that you are not living off of the state or the handouts of others.

But beyond not being a burden to others, it is vital to consider how you can serve others through your vocation. Look again at 11-12:

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 - Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, ¹² so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

Paul tells them to work with their hands. In Thessalonica and in the Roman Empire, manual labor was looked down upon, as it was seen as the work of slaves, not freedmen. But Paul was a tentmaker, and Jesus was a carpenter, and Paul knew that every work was given by God and a way to serve one's neighbor.

Think of all the people who are responsible for getting me from waking up to this moment.

Made the contacts
 Fitted me for the contacts
 Mailed them to me
 Water for a shower
 Built the house I live in
 Heat and electricity
 Clothes
 Roads
 Car
 Microphone
 Sound system
 Internet & computer

How many people through their vocation have served us this morning and helped to make this possible? There are very few vocations that do not give us an opportunity to serve our neighbor in some way. And for those of you considering what your vocation might be, consider what Tim Keller & Katherine Leary Alsdorf wrote, "*The question regarding our choice of work is no longer, 'What will make me the most money and give me the most status?' The question must now be, 'How, with my existing abilities and opportunities, can I be of greatest service to other people, knowing what I do of God's will and of human need?'*"

If we want to be like Christ, a life of self-serving leisure won't get us there. It is found in taking responsibility, in serving others, in doing our jobs to the glory of God.

As Bruce Waltke put it, *“The very definition of righteous people is that they disadvantage themselves to advantage others, while the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves.”*

3) Work to please Him, and rest in His approval

Remember that at the beginning of this passage, Paul wrote:

1 Thessalonians 4:1,9-12 - Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more...

In all you do, live to please God, and strive to do this more and more. Listen to Paul's words about how this impacts our approach to work in **Colossians 3:23-24** - *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, ²⁴ since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*

This is a revolutionary way of approaching work and vocation. No matter who your boss is or what they are like, it does not matter. Work to please the Lord. Even if no one else deserves your best, He does. Work for Him. Don't have a great husband? Work at being a wife as unto the Lord. Struggling to love your kids or your parents? Work at loving them as unto the Lord. Dealing with a difficult boss, or coworker, or employee? Work as unto the Lord. Or, as Paul said elsewhere:

1 Corinthians 10:31 - So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

Work to please Him. And then rest in His approval of you. When you think about it, what we do to make money is often at the center of our identity. Think about how often the next question after “what is your name?” is “and what do you do for a living?” So many of us identify ourselves by what we do.

The problem with that, of course, is that when our identity is tied up with our job, then our self-worth rises and falls with whether or not we have a job, or what kind of job we have, or how we are being evaluated at our job.

But the gospel tells us that we are enough because God has declared us enough in Jesus, because He has declared us righteous, worthy, and this is not on the basis of what we have done or haven't done.

***Ephesians 2:8-9** - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.*

And so whether or not we have a job or not, or what kind of job we have, it does not change our self-worth. In Jesus, we have an identity that does not depend upon our job or financial status. The more we rest in who God says we are in Christ, the more we find the freedom from judging ourselves on the basis of a job.

Some of you are old enough to remember the 1981 movie Chariots of Fire, a movie about two British track athletes – one Harold Abrahams, a Jewish man, and the other, Eric Liddell, a Christian – who compete in the 1924 Olympics. They each have a quote that reveals the difference between the one who has the deeper rest found in the gospel and the one who doesn't:

Harold Abrahams – *I will raise my eyes and look down that corridor; 4 feet wide, with 10 lonely seconds to justify my whole existence. But WILL I?*

Eric Liddell – *I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.*

See the difference? One man is running to justify his existence, to prove his life matters, so that even when he is at rest, he is weary. The other man is running because he knows who he is, and is therefore always at rest in his soul, even when he is working.

What does this mean? This goes below what we do for a living to why we do what we do, and what our motivation is. If we know that the verdict is in about our self-worth, then even though we work hard, there is a deeper rest in our souls, because we know we are enough. We know we are loved. We know we matter. But if we don't know that, then we are in danger of working for the wrong reasons. Working to prove ourselves, or to gain a sense of worth, or to provide security for ourselves. There is a deeper rest found in the gospel:

Hebrews 4:9-11 - *There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰ for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. ¹¹ Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.*

Matthew 11:28-30 - *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

How does God give you rest from your toil? What is this deeper rest? It is the rest that comes from faith in Jesus, believing the gospel.

Hebrews 4:2-3 - *For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. ³ Now we who have believed enter that rest*

We heard the gospel and believed it by faith, and entered that rest. This does not necessarily mean we will not work as hard. But it does change our relationship to our work, as we no longer have to prove anything or justify our existence, since God's verdict is in.

Because of the resurrection, it all matters. Nothing you do for the Lord is wasted. Trust that no matter how frustrating your vocation is on this side of eternity, on the other side, you will have perfect fulfillment in your vocation forever. And remember that God has given you good works to do. He has called you to the vocations you are in. Take up the responsibility He has for you, serve your neighbor, and give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because it all matters eternally.

1 Corinthians 15:58 - *Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*