

Get After It! Pt. 2
As Unto the Lord

Ephesians 4:28; 6:5-9; I Timothy 6: 17-19; Colossians 3: 17; 22-4:1

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**May 19, AD 2019
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

My college buddy and I decided it would be fun to take a class together. We settled on Anthropology, the study of human cultures and their development. It sounded interesting and we hoped it would be fairly easy. However, several problems arose. First, the class was way too early in the morning to suit my lifestyle. Second, the professor was not very engaged. He seemed more interested in returning to the remote South American tribe than teaching us. Third, I found that I was much more interested in a different kind of cultural exploration. Most of my time was occupied with “studying” the social habits and courting rituals of late twentieth SEC college students! This educational endeavor took most of my time that semester.

Before long, I had missed a lot of anthropology classes. Midterms were coming and my pal and I were in deep trouble. We managed to sweet talk a couple of very responsible girls into letting us copy their notes from the classes we missed. Thankfully, they had listened well in class. We learned their notes and got a respectable grade. That, of course, only encouraged our profligate lifestyle and by finals, we had to pull the same trick. On the surface, I acted pretty smug about how clever we were. But deep inside, I’ve never felt quite right about that.

This passage from Ephesians makes me think of those days: “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (Eph. 4: 28). I felt like I was stealing. The girls freely gave us their notes. But I just felt icky. Like I was stealing their work and passing it off as my own. I felt like I was stealing from my parents who gave me the gift of college. I felt like I was stealing from myself since I really didn’t learn much. The fact was, I was a taker. I didn’t study enough to be able to help someone else. I was a freeloader. And not just in that class. There were some years there where I look back and think, “Dawson, you were a tick. Leeching off others for your own pleasure and not putting much back.” And for all I tried to please myself, I wasn’t content. You can’t consume enough to fill the emptiness that only giving yourself away can bring.

Paul's words give us the essence of the Biblical perspective on work. You can be a taker or a giver. So don't be a taker. Don't be a drain. A parasite. A bleeder. Rather, work. Put energy into constructive activity. Use your hands, if you have them. Use your brains. Use your skills. Use your times. Whatever you have that can be part of a good, constructive endeavor. Generate. Grow. Create. Add value. Be a giver of your energy in order to create more. So that. So that you actually have something to share with others. Good work is a form of giving that creates a harvest so that you can give more. Work involves our participation in the flow of our Creator God who gave us the world as a source for life and abundance.

Work involves both gratitude and personal responsibility. I look back and give thanks that I have been given life and whatever measure of strength, health or skill I currently have. I give thanks to the Source. And to all those people who built into me. Then I labor as a grateful matter of feeling responsible to use what has been given to generate more good. To sustain my life, yes, of course. But more: to sustain and nurture others. The old word "commonwealth" is so applicable. When we are all working with a view to the larger health and prosperity of the family and community, we're participating in the common wealth, the commonwealth of a good society.

This basic principle applies whether you are a student just learning a skill, in the prime of life and power, or living a diminished life due to illness or age. It applies whether you have little money or great wealth. At every level, takers take, thinking only of what they're getting out of it. They fail in gratitude and become complainers. They fail to look outwards and become life-stealers. You get around them and feel like they're sucking the life out of you, because they are. But givers give. They give thanks for the life they have. They look outward to bless others. I think of sweet, frail Jesse Gray, a hundred years old and in her wheelchair—still grateful. Still making the effort to smile and confer blessing on any who speak to her. She doesn't steal. She works, and shares.

In our Colossians passage, Paul reveals the secret that can underlie all our work: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:18). Then, a few verses later, he specifically lifts up work we do that is required of us by others: "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men" (Col. 3: 23).

The power in the passage comes from recognizing who you really work for. A boss, or a coach, or even a master might think he is making you do stuff. And truly, you know you will suffer dire consequences if you don't obey. It can seem that you have no choice. You might not even get rewarded for the enforced service you render: you might get no raise, or still ride the bench, or not even get an allowance. It can seem that enforced work diminishes us and humiliates us.

Not so, says Scripture. Realize who you work for. Render service, even required, enforced service, *as if* to the Lord. You aren't working for your boss. You work for God. Your real wages will get paid in the next life, and they will be significantly more than any stack of dollars could be. Your boss, your teacher, your parent, your coach, your spouse, they may each and all think they control you. But when you know you work for the Lord, you are a free person. I'm doing this, not because you told me to, but because I freely offer it as praise and service to the God of all. He lets what I do matter. Whatever good anyone does, *whatever* good, this he will receive back from the Lord.

Baron von Hugel was a great spiritual master who offered a very simple rule for busy, distracted, harried people. He says you just have to answer one question, "What is the one will of God for me in this moment?" That question can plague people with a lot of freedom. We can wonder and worry ourselves silly with trying to figure out what we are supposed to do. The person who has a master, boss, or coach doesn't have that worry. I am supposed to do what I am told to do. God says, as long as it's moral, doing what I'm told is doing his will. Working for someone can be working for God. And thus I am free, even as I do what people think they are making me do. I'm doing God's will. I'm running laps for God. Washing dishes for God. Making copies for God. And he is pleased. I am in his will, and so all is well. You think you're enslaving me with your power, but actually you are freeing me to know I am doing the one will of God for me in this moment.

This perspective changes everything. It's full of gratitude and personal responsibility. It means I don't have to spend so much effort trying to get out of what is required of me. I can embrace it. I'm not wasting time. I'm pleasing God. It's my free time where I get in trouble. When working, I am in God's will and serving him. What a joy! What a privilege. We can, as a great prayer says, "transform toil into an offering of praise." Even the most enslaved, oppressed person has the freedom of attitude that dignifies work and makes it a spiritual act of service. We don't have choice about toil: it's part of life. But we do have power, even the weakest of us, to transform our toil into an offering of praise. Lord Jesus, I do this as unto you.

Finally, let's look at a third dimension to our work that can balance out the whole. This is the principal of keeping a Sabbath. It's the fourth of the Ten Commandments: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the LORD your God. On it you shall do no work.... For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day" (Exodus 20: 8-11). Take one day in seven to rest, worship and acknowledge that you are not necessary to the maintenance of the cosmos. Stop. In order to regain perspective, regather strength and remember who made you and why you live.

In the days when I was skipping anthropology class, I didn't really need anyone to tell me to rest. I wore it as a badge of pride when my nervous, pre-med roommate barked at me, "You make me waste more time than anyone I've ever met!" What, isn't that the purpose of an English major? I needed in those days to be told to work. To stop taking and start giving. And maybe some of us need to hear that today as well.

But for most of us in the room, we work all the time. We're crazy busy. Super productive and always on. A lot depends on us. And it's really hard to let the world, the church, the business or our chores just go on without us for a while. To those in that season of life, the Sabbath is a revolutionary idea. What do you mean stop for a day? I can't! Well, yes you can. And you've made a good start by being here today. Maybe you can start with a half day a week. The point today is not legalism about you can or can't do on Sundays, or even on your day off. The key is whether you take a regular time every week to let these three things happen:

- 1) To let the business, the house, the desk, the team get along without you. To discover anew that you are not necessary to the cosmos. To just put it all down. To turn off the phone and the computer. To be present in your life.
- 2) To acknowledge consciously the God who created you and who redeemed you in Jesus Christ. To make a return of thanksgiving to him. To practice gratitude through worship. To entrust the world and your part of it to him.
- 3) To refresh through activities that restore your soul even if they don't make you money or fulfill an obligation. To walk, read, garden. To relate to your loved ones. To rejoice in being alive and with others.

It's hard work to stop working and enter worship, rest and relating. But you can do it. Practice a regular day, or half-day where you have been freed by God's command to cease labor and enter worship, rest and relating. You will discover a

joy, and a renewed productivity in the rest of your life. Try it weekly for six months and let me know what happens.

Last Sunday, I had to fight for that freedom. I got up early, read Scripture and prayed. So far so good. But then I didn't have to be at church til eleven, so I worked for an hour on next year's Lent study. Not good. But then we went to church and afterwards had lunch with Rhonda's parents. Every time I kept thinking I should leave and get back to work, I remembered it was the Sabbath and I didn't need to work. Sunday night I could just hung out with family. The rule of Sabbath created a freedom in me to relate to loved ones without distraction. It reminded me what life is for. The rule of Sabbath lets us breathe and recall the very purpose of lives. It involves taking personal responsibility to live a life of deliberate gratitude expressed through time spent refraining from work. It will change your life.

Our God created us to flourish in joy before him, participating in his great work of recreating and redeeming the world. We get to be givers, not just takers. To contribute. He values us enough to give us the power to take personal responsibility to live grateful lives. To live productive lives that include hard, effortful work balanced by worshipful rest. He shows us the key to joy: to do everything as unto the Lord, with thanks to him and service for him.

Our old spiritual friend George Herbert said that the phrase, "For thy sake," is like a drop of magic elixir that changes everything. It turns toil into praise and drudgery into pleasure. "Teach me, my God and King, / in all things thee to see. / And what I do in anything, / to do as for thee."