

The Gift of Work

Genesis 1: 26-28; 2: 15; Exodus 20: 8-11

Introduction

Seven **creation commands** are found in the first few chapters of Genesis: the command to produce children, the command to fill the earth, the command to subdue the earth, the command to have dominion over animals, the command to rest from work on the Sabbath day, marriage, and the command to work (John Murray, Principles of Conduct). Probably some of these could have been combined or lumped together, but seven makes a good biblical number, doesn't it? This morning I want to focus on the last one, **the command to work**.

When I was a boy, I used to watch a TV show called "Doby Gillis". On that show there was a very funny character named Maynard who was known around town for being a somewhat clumsy, worthless fellow who never worked and was never looking for work. The truth is, Maynard didn't want to work, and every time the word "work" came up in any conversation, Maynard would react abruptly with "Work !!!!!?????", and then he would quickly disappear through the door not to be seen again for the rest of the day. For him, work was the great enemy—the great monster, Leviathan—to be avoided at all costs, even the cost of making an honest living.

In many ways Maynard was the star of the "Doby Gillis Show". He was truly funny. But somehow I don't think God was amused because Maynard represented one of the fundamental shortcomings of sinful human nature—**hostility to labor**. Many people, even many Christians, don't like to work especially if the work consists of **manual labor**. They would rather spend most of their time in idle conversation, amusements, or entertainment of some sort or another. Some people in the US are retiring early at age 50 so they can spend the rest of their lives traveling or playing golf, but this is a terrible misunderstanding of the reason God created us.

God created us for the purpose of glorifying Him through our work.

This is clear from the texts we have just read from Genesis, and it is also clear from **human experience**. Most of what we do each week, or what we should be doing most of the time each week, is working. And if our lives are for the purpose of glorifying God—something all Christians should agree with—then it is reasonable to assume that God should be glorified **mostly** from our labor. Certainly He should be glorified in our Sunday worship, but we don't have corporate worship **six days** a week. We have it **once** a week. God doesn't want to be glorified only once a week when we show up for worship on Sunday mornings. He wants to be glorified seven days a week.

The reason you and I are breathing air right now, the reason we are alive, is to glorify God with our work. I will give you **four** main reasons or proofs why I believe this.

I. First, our work reflects the image of God in which He made us.

A. Genesis 1: 26-28

Notice from Gen. 1:26 that the image of man and the likeness of man to God are followed immediately in the text with the work God wants man to do.

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and **let them rule**.... (Genesis 1:26a NASB; emphasis mine)

God is a God who **rules** over the creation He has made, but He rules both **directly** and **indirectly**—sometimes **without** man, and sometimes **through** man. He does many things without the aid or help of man. He creates the world out of nothing. He sends the sun to shine and the rain and lightning to fall upon the earth without man’s help. He controls the orbits of the planets around the sun. But God also rules **indirectly** through those who bear His image—men and women. “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let **them** rule... (Genesis 1:26 NASB).

Notice that God says, “let **them** rule”. He does not say, “let **him** rule”. Both men and women are involved in ruling over the earth. The text also does not say, “Let us rule.” It says, “Let us **make**”, but not “Let us **rule**.”

Nowhere in **Gen. 1** does it say that “God **ruled**”. The text says that God **created**, the Spirit of God **was moving**, God **said**, God **saw**, God **separated**, God **made**, God **called**, God **placed**, and God **blessed**; but the text never says that God **ruled**. Of course, we know that God rules. But the emphasis in **Gen. 1** is that man—male and female—rules. And then in Gen. 2: 15, God places man in the garden to cultivate it and keep it. Producing children, cultivating and keeping the garden, along with ruling the animal world, **defines** what God means by ruling and having dominion.

God does what man **cannot** do. He creates the world and all the natural forces which govern the world **out of nothing**, but God does not do what man **can** do. He does not create additional human beings (i.e. He does not populate the world), and He does not cultivate and keep the garden.

There are many different ways that man reflects the **image of God**. He has a **conscience**, a sense of right and wrong. He can **reason** and solve all sorts of problems. (You never see monkeys sitting around a table discussing the existence of God). He possesses a **will or self-determination**. In other words, he makes real choices, even sacrificial choices. He also possesses **emotions**: love, hate, sorrow, joy, and many other emotions which are attributed to God in the Bible. But the element of God’s image which seems to stand out in **Genesis 1** is **man’s rule** over creation, his dominion over the earth—**his work**. Indirectly, God rules the world **by means** of those who bear His image.

B. Gen. 1: 27-28

We find the same emphasis in **Gen. 1: 27-28**.

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 God said to **them**, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:27-28 NASB).

This is the second time in three verses that man and woman's rule over creation has been mentioned, and **both** times their rule over creation is closely **connected in the text** with the fact that man and woman are created in the image of God.

Let me repeat: **Our work reflects the image of God in us—therefore, our work cannot be separated from our being made in God's image.**

And this is **the first reason** why I believe that **God created us for the purpose of glorifying Him in our work**. Everything in **Gen. 1** points to the significance of our work because of its relationship to the image of God.

II. The second reason is this: We work because God works—the cycle (pattern) of God's rest and work in the creation story is the example given to us for our cycle (pattern) of rest and work.

A. Genesis 2: 2-3

By the seventh day God completed His **work** which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His **work** which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His **work** which God had created and made.

The word "work" occurs **three** times in those two verses for emphasis. Furthermore, God's **rest** on the seventh day—only **one** day—has meaning only against the background of His **work** of creation for **six** days. What does this tell us? It tells us that **God is primarily a laborer—a worker**. He is not primarily a **rester**. He rested one day. He worked six days. Divine energy, work, is flowing from God's mouth, as it were, when He says, "Let there be... and there was."

B. Hebrews 1: 3a; Col. 1: 17; John 5: 17; 6: 27-29

What's more, God is still working. We shouldn't think that God continued His rest after the seventh day. He rested from **creation**, but He did not rest from the work of **sustaining** creation.

And He [Christ] is the radiance of His [God the Father's] glory and the exact representation of His nature, and **upholds all things by the word of His power** (Hebrews 1:3a NASB).

Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is upholding all the natural forces of creation by His sustaining power. The same truth is found in Col. 1: 17.

He [Christ] is before all things, and in Him [Christ] all things hold together (Colossians 1:17 NASB).

Theologians call this the work of God's **providence**. He is not an absentee God who creates the world and then goes on vacation to stroll on the beach or play golf—letting creation run all by itself. No, the power of God is essential for the continuing forces of nature—the law of gravity, and the biochemical laws which keep your heart ticking. Without His constant input of sustaining work, the world would collapse and cease to exist. Your heart and mine would stop beating. God keeps working. He is not an idle God.

Furthermore, God is still working for **man's salvation**. Although the atoning work of Christ is finished and complete, God is still working through the Holy Spirit to apply the work of salvation to men's hearts. Jesus said on one occasion,

This is the **work** of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent (John 6:29 NASB).

The work of the Holy Spirit, who is the third person of the Trinity, is working to apply the atoning work of Christ to the heart. He regenerates men who are spiritually dead and makes them spiritually alive. Furthermore, we should not think of any person of the Trinity as working alone or independently of any other person of the Trinity. When the Father is working, the Son is working; and when the Son is working the Spirit is working, and so on. God as the Trinity is at work in salvation.

I want you to think clearly about this. **If** God worked in creation, and He continues to work after creation, and **if** we are made in the image of God, **then** it is reasonable to assume that we also must be working. Anyone who does not work denies his own identity—the very image of God who is a worker. **God works**, and our work is patterned after God's work.

C. Exodus 20: 8-11

We see this same cycle of work and rest in Exodus 20: 8-11

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.⁹ "Six days you shall labor and do all your work,¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you.¹¹ "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11 NASB)

We generally emphasize only the command to **rest** one day of the week, but we commonly ignore the command to **labor** which is equally important. The command to rest has no meaning apart from the command to labor. Furthermore, it is not simply the command to labor but the command to labor with a certain degree of **constancy**—six days, not one day, two days, or five days. We may also reason that the command implies the necessity of working **several hours** a day, not just **two or three**. (Many European countries like Spain and Portugal reduced the work week to 35 hours and they wonder why they are having economic problems. Could it be that their economic problems are caused by not working long enough?) The constancy of labor in

Exodus is consistent with everything we have seen so far in Genesis. God made us for the purpose of laboring in His garden, which is now the world, and our work in this world is a reflection of His work in creation **which took six days, not one**. Now, could God have made the world in one day? Sure. He could have made the world in one second, but He didn't. But He made it in six days as a pattern for our labor.

So we see that from the very beginning of creation, man had a **schedule** to keep patterned after God's schedule in creation—a **regular work-week** consisting of six days and **so many hours of daylight** during the day (Hamilton, p. 171; from Currid ?). He was not “whiling” away his hours—like Maynard on the Doby Gillis Show—sleeping in a hammock or swimming at the beach, or playing cards and shooting pool at the trading center. He spent **most** of his time working, and his work was pleasing to God. God looked on everything He had **made** with delight, and we can say with confidence that He looked on man's **labor** with delight. Man's labor reflected God's labor, and it was **very good**.

We work because God works—the cycle of God's rest and work in the creation story is the example given to us for our cycle of rest and work.

This is the **second reason** why I believe that you and I are breathing air right now—we live to glorify God in our work **because God also works**.

The difference now is that because of Christ's work, we rest the first day and work the remaining six days.

III. The third reason is this: God gave us work as a blessing, not a curse.

Genesis 2: 15, “Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. (Genesis 2:15 NASB).

You need to understand **three** important things about this verse.

A. The first thing is that Gen. 2: 15 takes place before Gen. 3.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve fell into sin. But this is before they fell into sin. But why is this important? It proves that work is **not a curse**—it is **not punishment** for man's sin. Many Africans believe that work is the curse God gave Adam as punishment, but this is not what the Bible says. When you ask the question: When did Adam start working in the garden? The answer you often get is that Adam began working in the garden **after** he fell into sin and; therefore, working in the garden is part of God's curse upon man. But this is clearly wrong theology, and wrong **theology** leads to wrong **behavior**. Adam was working in the garden **before** the fall; and therefore work is **not a curse**.

B. The second thing we should understand about this verse is that work is a blessing.

Not only should we believe that work is not a **curse**, we should believe that work is a positive **blessing**—a gift from God. It should be clear that before man fell into sin, everything God did to Adam and Eve was because God **loved** them and **delighted** in them. God took pleasure in everything He had created, calling it “**good**”, but after He had made man He called His creation

“**very good**”. God was delighted especially with man who reflected the very image of his Maker. God **enjoyed** His creation, and **He wanted man to enjoy it, too**. Furthermore, God enjoyed the work involved in creating the world, and He knew man would enjoy **his** work in the garden. At this point in time Adam had not sinned against God, so why else would God put him in the garden except to **bless** him and make his life **enjoyable**? God also makes Adam’s life **more** enjoyable later by giving him a helper suitable to him, a woman. In every way, then, God is progressively improving man’s life on earth, **first** with labor and **then** with a companion to help him with his labor.

C. The third thing you should see in Gen. 2: 15 is the kind of work God gave Adam to do.

God does not put Adam in the cockpit of a jet plane or a space shuttle. He does not dress him up with a coat and tie and put him behind a corporate desk at MTN or Barclay Bank. He could have done this. God could have made many men and women at one time. He could have created a complete modern culture with a large degree of sophistication and economic development. He could have dressed Adam up literally in a coat and tie and placed him behind a desk, but He doesn’t do that. God puts Adam in the **dirt** and at the end of the day Adam had dirt under his fingernails and under his toenails, and his hair was dusty. And, do you know what? Life was good. **Adam was as happy as he could be.**

From this we have the **fourth reason** for believing that **God created us for the purpose of glorifying Him in our work.**

IV. God gives dignity to every kind of work (that is, any work which doesn’t violate His word).

There seems to be a misunderstanding in all cultures—western, African, or Asian, or any other—that there is something **demeaning and humiliating** about getting your clothes dirty. Furthermore, it seems there is something **elevating** or **ennobling** about putting on a nice shirt and tie. Where do we get these ideas? We don’t get them from the Bible. In his own home town of Nazareth, the Lord Jesus was known as “the carpenter” (Mk. 6: 1-3). I worked as a carpenter, cabinet-maker, and house painter for more than twenty years. I breathed sawdust and paint fumes. I got dirty and sweaty and **never once put on a tie** to go to work. Even this past summer I built the inside of a house including the carpentry, plumbing, plastering, and electrical along with the help of my youngest son and my wife. There were days outside in 100 degree heat when I was knee-deep in mud digging sewer lines to the septic tank. I understand manual labor. I have done manual labor for most of my life.

The apostle Paul understood manual labor. He was a craftsman who used dried animal skins as raw materials to make tents. His job was one of the least respectable and common in ancient Palestine. At the end of each day, Paul smelled like animal skins. You probably wouldn’t have been able to get near him; the smell would have made you sick. The apostle Peter was a commercial fisherman. I wonder what **he** smelled like—fish, I would imagine. Our Lord Jesus accomplished something during His first 30 years which He did not accomplish during His last three years of public ministry—**He gave dignity to manual labor, all kinds of manual labor.**

Many of our religious traditions fail to give dignity to manual labor. We dress religious leaders with colorful robes, crown them with large pointed hats, and hand them scepters like kings and call them “Your Grace”, “my lord bishop”, “your holiness”, or “Reverend so and so”. I do not say this to be sarcastic or funny, but because I think that there is something **fundamentally wrong** with some of our **ecclesiastical traditions** and our view of church leadership.

Our Lord Jesus is the only man who ever lived who fit the description of “his grace”, “his holiness” or “Reverend”, but can you imagine **Jesus** walking around during His earthly ministry with expensive robes, a big hat and a king’s scepter? No. He was the **carpenter-King**, and He ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. And the night He was betrayed He took off His common robes, knelt down and washed the disciples’ smelly feet. But we don’t do that. We keep our distance from people who are more common than we are, and **we help our leaders keep their distance** by giving them special titles and putting white collars around their necks.

No, we don’t learn our hatred of common labor from the **Bible** but from our **culture and sometimes from our religious traditions** which teach us that if our work makes us dirty or smelly, or if our work makes little money (kache, kache), it must be unimportant or have low status. **But really now**, how important is growing food? Do any of you dislike eating? I like the work that John here is doing. He grows vegetables in his garden and brings me broccoli to eat. Of course, I pay him for it; but I still appreciate his labor because I don’t know how to grow broccoli. Everyone here is clothed. Someone had to make those clothes. Everyone one of us likes a roof over our head at night. We would rather sleep in a house than in the open field with the rats, snakes, and insects. But do we esteem the work of carpenters and brick layers? No. They’re just common laborers.

The really important people are **government officials** cruising down the road in their new Land Rovers or BMW’s, people who sometimes don’t even know what they will be doing for the next month—if anything. I know that some of the government bureaucrats in my country are not doing much; and quite frankly, I like it better when they are not doing anything—because when they’re not doing anything, they are not spending my money. Don’t get me wrong. Being a government official can be a very important job **if** you believe that you are responsible before God for serving people. But how many government officials see themselves as **servants of God and servants of the people?** Many of them think you serve them!

You see, our **twisted sense of dignity** is not biblical. God gives dignity to all labor, however common and underpaid. We should pursue the task for which God has **called us and equipped us**. **And when we work we should feel God’s pleasure upon our labors.** Don’t let others rob you of your dignity and your sense of calling before God for the work He has given you to do.

I have given you four reasons why I believe **God created us for the purpose of glorifying Him with our work.**

I. Our work reflects the image of God—our work cannot be separated from being made in God’s image.

II. We work because God works—the pattern of God’s rest and work in the creation story is the example given to us for our pattern of rest and work.

III. God gave us work as a blessing, not a curse.

IV. God gives dignity to all kinds of work.

Let me conclude with one practical application.

Conclusion

If God commands us to work, then there is always work to do—therefore, idleness is sin.

God never commands us to do the impossible. I don't know what the economic situation in Thessalonica was during Paul's day, but I suspect that it was probably not very good. Economic historians tell us that before the 17th century and the Industrial Revolution, the vast majority of people in the world were poor. It was only after man discovered the ability to mass-produce goods and services that some nations began to climb their way out of poverty. So, I'm inclined to believe that there were many poor people in Thessalonica in 52 AD when the second letter was written. Nevertheless, here is what Paul tells them,

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. (2 Thessalonians 3:6 NASB)

Now what was this "tradition" which the Thessalonians received from Paul and what was this "unruly life" he was referring to? We might expect that Paul is referring to some kind of doctrinal error or at least some serious sin against God's law found in the Ten Commandments, like the sin of adultery or sexual immorality. And surely there were both doctrinal errors and sexual immorality in Thessalonica—and Paul addresses these problems as well—but this is not what we find in the context of chapter 3 (cf. John Murray, **Principles of Conduct**, p. 84). The traditions which they have received from the apostle Paul is **the tradition of working for one's own food**, for he goes on to say this in vv. 7-8:

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you,⁸ nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you;⁹ not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example.¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. (2 Thessalonians 3:7-10 NASB)

But rather than following this tradition of working hard and eating one's own bread, some of the Christians in Thessalonica were not working but were acting like **"busybodies"**.

For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies.¹² Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ **to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread**. (2 Thessalonians 3:11-12 NASB)

The word for "busybody" in the Greek means "to waste one's labor about something". The NIV has a good translation of this verse, "They are not busy. They are busy**bodies**." In other words, they were not busy **working**; they were busy **meddling** in the business of others or wasting other

peoples' time. **They worked very hard at not working.** Some people are like this—they work very hard at not working. They waste their energy doing nothing constructive at all.

Paul admonishes them in no uncertain terms. “If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat either.” The implied message is this: **None of you Thessalonians who are working should feed people** who are **able** to work but are not **willing** to work. Let them go hungry until they **are** willing to work—as the Proverb states, “A worker's appetite works for him, For his hunger urges him on” (Proverbs 16:26 NASB). **If you get hungry enough, you'll find something to do.**

After living almost 11 years in Uganda, I no longer believe that there is no work here. The main problem, I think, is that there is little work that people **want**—the kind of work where you put on the coat and the tie. Uganda has plenty of arable land, sun, rainfall, and two growing seasons. When it doesn't rain, many of you could irrigate. When I travel **I see thousands of acres** of uncultivated farmland, thousands more acres that could be planted in rapidly growing pine trees. When I used to ride by the trading centers on my bicycle, I often saw women working in the fields with babies strapped to their backs, but **the men were playing cards** under the same shade tree every day as if they had not moved for days. They were almost like statues frozen in time.

Economic experts tell us that even today **ninety percent** of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) in Africa is **agriculture**. What's more, **women produce 80% of the agriculture in Africa** (George Ayittey). Many experts believe that the secret to Africa's economic future is **not foreign aid from western governments** or the World Bank. Africans are intelligent enough to know what happens to billions of dollars of foreign aid—it is magically converted into new Land Rovers and houses costing a billion Ush. Fifty years of foreign aid has not significantly improved the lives of most Africans. Africa's economic future may not be in manufacturing. But Africa is a virtual Garden of Eden of **untapped agricultural potential**. Forget the oil, the gold, and the minerals for now. Africans regularly get murdered when oil, gold, and diamonds are discovered. But wars are seldom fought over corn, beans, and coffee—at least I don't know of any.

I realize that I could be missing the point. I know there are relatively few available jobs. I am willing to humble myself and be corrected if what I say is incorrect or unnecessarily offensive. At the same time, I must take into consideration the cultural mandate of Genesis—the command to work which **applies to all times and all cultures and all economic situations.**

If God commands us to work, then there is always work to do.

This does not mean that there is an abundance of jobs. We know that isn't true. You may not be able to find a **job**, but you can always find some kind of **work**. Lack of a job does not give you the liberty to be idle—to walk around Mbarara aimlessly, to listen to the radio all day, or to play cards or to chit-chat with your other idle friends all day long. If you don't have anything useful to do, go out and find something useful, even if it means **little** pay or **no** pay. But you say, “Why should I work for no pay?” Well, do you get paid for walking around Mbarara, playing cards, or listening to your radio? Do your friends pay you for chatting with them all afternoon? Okay. If no one pays you for such things, then do something **useful** for no pay.

But here is what I think will happen if you do. If you are faithful in seeking meaningful labor, I believe that God will allow you to find work. When there seems to be **no way**, God will find **a way—but not without your obedience to His command to work.**