

Work as Christian Duty

Devotional Reading: Ecclesiastes 9:4–10

Background Scripture: Genesis 2:15–25; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12

Genesis 2:15

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Exodus 20:9

⁹ “Six days you shall labor and do all your work,”

John 5:17

¹⁷ In his defense Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”

John 9:4

⁴ “As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.

Acts 20:33–35

³³ “I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

2 Thessalonians 3:6–12

⁶ In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive 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 offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.”

¹¹ We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busy-bodies. ¹² Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat.

Key Text

“In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” —Acts 20:35

Social Teachings of the Church

Unit 3: Fulfilling Our Obligations to God and Society

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the main points of each text.
2. Explain the purpose of work from these texts.
3. Write a personal resolution regarding work in service to God.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Valuing Work
- B. Lesson Context: Acts
- C. Lesson Context: 2 Thessalonians

I. Work Given by God

(Genesis 2:15; Exodus 20:9)

- A. Commanded (Genesis 2:15)
- B. Limited (Exodus 20:9)

II. Work of God (John 5:17; 9:4)

- A. The Father (John 5:17)
- B. The Son (John 9:4)

III. Work to Meet Needs (Acts 20:33–35)

- A. Helping Oneself (vv. 33–34)
- B. Helping Others (v. 35)
A Box of Diapers

IV. Work and the People of God

(2 Thessalonians 3:6–12)

- A. Be Not Idle (v. 6)
- B. An Imitable Example (vv. 7–9)
- C. Earning One's Food (vv. 10–12)
Growing a Garden

Conclusion

- A. Embracing Work
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Valuing Work

My grandfather taught me the value of hard work. After retiring from the military, he started his own construction business, enlisting the help of his teenage grandsons. We spent our summers pouring concrete and building homes from the ground up, laboring tirelessly from sunrise to sunset. After a long day of construction work, we would return to his 80-acre farm to tend to the cattle and handle various farm duties. We repeated this routine every weekday.

My grandfather grew up during the Great Depression (1929–1939), a fact I never fully appreciated as a teenager. His father and grandfather desperately wanted to work but struggled to find employment, making my grandfather's formative years challenging. Witnessing their struggle, he developed a strong work ethic, which he passed to his grandsons by example.

In today's lesson, we will explore God's design for work, starting from creation and continuing through the life of the first-century church with application for today. While this lesson reviews a variety of Scripture texts, those of primary interest will be Acts 20:33–35 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12, both focusing on words from the apostle Paul.

B. Lesson Context: Acts

The book of Acts covers events from about AD 30 to 63. Our lesson segment from that book takes us almost to the end of that period.

In about AD 58, Paul traveled to Jerusalem after concluding his third missionary journey. Some members of the church in Jerusalem had fallen into poverty. Therefore, Paul's trip included collecting offerings from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia (Romans 15:25–26; 1 Corinthians 16:1–4; 2 Corinthians 8:1–4). This offering allowed Christians who were predominately of Gentile background to support the Christians in Jerusalem who were predominately of Jewish background.

Paul initially planned to sail to Syria from Greece to deliver the offering. But discovering a plot against him, he traveled by land through Macedonia (Acts 20:3). Paul aimed to arrive in

Jerusalem by Pentecost (20:16), which would mark the anniversary of the church's beginning (2:1). This would be a significant occasion for one group of Christians to receive a life-sustaining gift from fellow believers of different backgrounds.

C. Lesson Context: 2 Thessalonians

Paul took the message of the gospel to the city of Thessalonica during his second missionary journey (AD 52–54). What we know about his effort to plant a church there and the immediate aftermath of doing so are recorded in Acts 17:1–9, 13. The apostle did not start a church in every town or city he visited. But the demographics of Thessalonica made that city a good candidate for a church plant. First, the city had one or more synagogues, where Paul liked to begin voicing his message (Acts 17:2, 10, 16). Second, the city was large—by some estimates, nearly 200,000 people lived there in the Roman era. Third, Thessalonica sat astride major trade routes of land and sea.

Some commentators think that the letters we call 1 and 2 Thessalonians were the very first of the New Testament documents written. Since our study concerns 2 Thessalonians, the most immediate literary context for it is 1 Thessalonians. That letter features a mixture of expressions of Paul's gratitude, a summary of his ministry in the city, doctrinal clarifications, and instructions for daily life. The tone of 2 Thessalonians is direct, as Paul finds it necessary to review some of the same topics again.

I. Work Given by God

(Genesis 2:15; Exodus 20:9)

A. Commanded (Genesis 2:15)

15. The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

This verse is crucial to understanding work in God's world. Occurring prior to the fall (Genesis 3), this is evidence that work is good. While the curse following humanity's disobedience renders work toilsome—marked by thorns, thistles, and sweat to bring forth food (3:17–19)—it did not start out that way. The toilsome nature of work is still with us today, but it ought not to distort

our view of work itself. God himself is a worker, demonstrated by the creation narratives in Genesis 1–2, and he calls humanity to work alongside him (examples: Ezekiel 22:30; Matthew 28:19–20). For an interesting back and forth on the nature of work, see Ecclesiastes 2:10, 17–26; 3:9–13, 22; 4:8; 5:18–19; 8:15.

B. Limited (Exodus 20:9)

9. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work,”

This verse is part of the fourth of the Ten Commandments, that of remembering the Sabbath day to keep it holy (Exodus 20:8–11; see also Deuteronomy 5:12–15). Work is necessary, and so is rest (Exodus 34:21). God modeled rest from his work of creation in Genesis 2:1–3. The version of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 established God's rest on the seventh day after six days of work as the model for those under the old covenant.

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to someone who says that the need for work itself results from the fall?

Digging Deeper

In what ways is the need for work and rest modeled in the Old Testament?

II. Work of God

(John 5:17; 9:4)

A. The Father (John 5:17)

17. In his defense Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”

This verse is Jesus' response to Jewish leaders who persecute him for healing on the Sabbath (John 5:1–16). Although God rested after his work of creation (Genesis 2:1–3), his providential care continues without interruption (Psalm 121; etc.), and Jesus shows the alignment of his own priorities with those of his heavenly Father. Consistent throughout the Gospels, to heal on the Sabbath is to do the good work that his Father has been doing up to this point (Matthew 12:10–11; Mark 3:1–5; Luke 13:10–17; etc.).

B. The Son (John 9:4)

4. **“As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.”**

Here, Jesus uses the terms *day* and *night* to represent his own limited time on earth to *do the works of him who sent* him, the Father. Contextually, Jesus is speaking with his disciples about a man born blind (John 9:1–2). The reason Jesus gives for why this man was born blind has nothing to do with the man’s or his parents’ sin; rather, it happened so that “the works of God might be displayed in him” (9:3).

What Do You Think?

How would you summarize the main points of Christ Jesus’ work?

Digging Deeper

In what ways can we join with Christ Jesus in this work? (See John 14:12.)

III. Work to Meet Needs

(Acts 20:33–35)

In our next section, Paul addresses the elders of the church in Ephesus. Speaking to them before heading to Jerusalem for the final time, he summarizes his ministry to them.

A. Helping Oneself (vv. 33–34)

33. **“I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing.”**

Much of the economy of the city of Ephesus is rooted in the renowned temple of the goddess Artemis (Diana). This temple attracted many visitors to the city and brought significant wealth to the artisans who made shrines (Acts 19:24–27). However, Paul’s preaching and the resulting conversions to Christ disrupted the local economy. Those who profited greatly from the temple incited a riot in response (19:28–40).

In contrast to the motives of the silversmiths in Ephesus, Paul does not preach the gospel for material gain. Paul willingly gives up worldly possessions in order to “gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8).

To a modern reader, it may seem unusual that Paul mentions *clothing* alongside *silver* and *gold*.

However, dye and fabric were costly in antiquity, and clothing was often valued similarly to gold and silver (examples: Genesis 24:53; Exodus 3:22; 2 Kings 5:5). The main point is not the specific items mentioned, but rather that faith in Christ does not nullify the law of God that prohibits coveting (Exodus 20:17; Romans 7:7).

34. **“You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions.”**

The phrase *you yourselves know* mirrors how Paul started his speech to the elders (Acts 20:18). He spent at least three years in Ephesus, giving the elders ample time to know him and his character (20:31). He had the right to receive support from the churches and sometimes did (2 Corinthians 11:7–8; Philippians 4:15; contrast 1 Corinthians 9:12–14). But he needs to distinguish himself from false teachers who sought to profit from their teachings.

It is worth reiterating the reach of Paul’s work and its benefits: his *hands . . . have supplied* not only to his own *needs* (Acts 18:1–3) but also to those of his traveling *companions*.

B. Helping Others (v. 35)

35. **“In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”**

Physical labor is not to be for selfish gain, but to assist those in need. Paul worked with his hands to be self-supporting, thereby setting an example for others (compare John 13:15; 1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:17). His actions confirmed his words, or to put it a bit differently, his walk matched his talk. The word translated *weak* can mean someone physically ill or spiritually vulnerable (examples: Matthew 10:8; Romans 14:1).

Although *the words of the Lord Jesus* that Paul cites are not explicitly recorded in the Gospels, we must remember that the Gospels do not capture every word spoken by Jesus (see John 20:30–31). Thus, this particular quote may have been commonly known within the early church through oral tradition. Additionally, its message aligns with Jesus’ teachings (Matthew 10:8; 25:34–36; Mark 10:21–22; Luke 14:12–14; etc.).

What Do You Think?

How can you use the fruit of your labor to give generously to others in the upcoming week?

Digging Deeper

How do our expressions of generosity help further God's mission in the world?

A Box of Diapers

Recently, I was made aware that someone I knew needed diapers for her baby. As soon as my husband arrived home from work, I told him about the need. His answer was immediate: "Let's go buy some."

Our children were long out of diapers, and it had been a while since we'd shopped in the baby aisle. We found the diapers and asked ourselves what size box to buy. Remembering how quickly diapers get used up, we promptly bought the largest box we could find. It was expensive, but we agreed that God had given us the resources and awareness to meet this need.

When we delivered the diapers, the mother came outside and gave me a huge hug. Her smile lit up her entire face. She struggled to speak English, but in broken speech, she conveyed her deepest thanks.

My husband and I smiled all the way home. It truly is "more blessed to give than to receive!" How can you use your work and the resources God has given you to meet the needs of those around you? —B. R.

IV. Work and the People of God

(2 Thessalonians 3:6–12)

A. Be Not Idle (v. 6)

6. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.

The *brothers and sisters* Paul now addresses are those in the church at Thessalonica (see Lesson Context). His appeal *in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ* strikes a note of formality and utmost seriousness (compare Acts 16:18). This sense is fur-

ther heightened by Paul's language of *command*. He is not offering mere suggestions or guidelines! In fact, he uses the word translated "command" a total of five times in his two short letters to the Thessalonians (here and 1 Thessalonians 4:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:4, 10, 12).

The command deals with behavior toward *every believer who is idle and disruptive*. The idea is someone who lives in a haphazard way. This undoubtedly includes having a poor work ethic—laziness, if you will. Those not in this category are not to hang around with those who are. We may wonder if this consequence rises to the level of needing to "disfellowship" the errant individual for the health of the church. The New Testament establishes three categories for doing so. These are

- Doctrinal defection: 1 Timothy 1:3–11; 6:3–5
- Moral defection: 1 Corinthians 5
- Divisiveness: Romans 16:17–18; Titus 3:10–11

It seems unlikely that this situation has reached the point of needing to disfellowship under any of these patterns. A chance for repentance and forgiveness comes first (2 Corinthians 2:5–11).

B. An Imitable Example (vv. 7–9)

7. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you,

In contrasting himself with the disorderly person of the previous verse, Paul offers himself as an example *to follow*. His request is not unreasonable. As seen above in the commentary on Genesis 2:15, work is good. God himself works and invites humanity to join him.

Paul emphasizes that he is not asking his readers to do anything he will not do (and has not already done!) himself. One key distinction between the

How to Say It

Achaia	Uh-kay-uh.
Ephesus	Ef-uh-sus.
Macedonia	Mass-eh-doe-nee-uh.
Thessalonians	Thess-uh-lo-nee-unz (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Thessalonica	Thess-uh-lo-nye-kuh (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).



**SERVE GOD
THROUGH
YOUR LABOR.**

Visual for Lesson 10. Display this visual as you ask the discussion questions associated with 2 Thessalonians 3:9.

apostles and false teachers is that the former practiced what they preached and expected others to do the same (1 Timothy 6:3–10; etc.). Because Paul’s actions were consistent, he could confidently ask people to follow his example, knowing it was the will of God (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1).

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.

The first part of this verse is an extension of the previous verse. In avoiding laziness in their manner of living, Paul and his companions had made sure to provide compensation for the food they ate.

The middle part of this verse reflects Paul’s previous letter to the church (see 1 Thessalonians 2:9). Paul likely refers to his manual work as a tentmaker, through which he supports himself in Corinth (Acts 18:3). Likely for the sake of emphasis, Paul uses two words, *laboring* and *toiling*, to emphasize the extent of his efforts to avoid being a financial burden. He also uses the words *night* and *day* as another point of emphasis. This perhaps alludes to a noteworthy sacrifice of his time, working to meet his needs while preaching and teaching the gospel.

9. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate.

The word translated as *right* in English can also

mean “authority” or “power.” The two terms are related, although there is this difference: *authority* is the right to do something, while *power* is the ability to do something.

As an apostle of Christ, Paul had both power and authority. And any decision of his not to use either is not evidence of their absence. He simply chose not to exercise either. He consistently evaluated his actions and refrained if they would cause other believers to stumble (1 Corinthians 8:13; 9:1–19). In the case of the Thessalonians, it would have been of more significant benefit for them to see his *model* of working for his bread rather than receiving it without payment.

What Do You Think?

How will your perspective and attitude toward your work serve as an example to others regarding your life in Christ?

Digging Deeper

What behaviors and tendencies do you need to change so that you might be an example in this regard?

C. Earning One’s Food (vv. 10–12)

10. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.”

Paul places great importance on *work* and personal responsibility. A person *unwilling to work* is not fit to receive food to *eat*. We may safely assume that the word *one* in this command refers to those physically able to work. Historically, the church cared for those unable to work for various reasons (Acts 4:34–35; 6:1–6; etc.). Paul’s instruction aims to ensure that those capable of working do their part, thereby preventing a burden from falling unfairly on others.

Growing a Garden

My sister-in-law is an avid gardener. Even in the winter, she grows seedlings under the warmth of heat lamps. When planting them in the spring, she places them strategically, where each will benefit most.

The first year she planted her garden, she offered

us a portion of her tomato harvest. I gladly took some, thinking I could cook them into salsa or tomato sauce since our family doesn't like to eat fresh tomatoes. Those tomatoes sat on our counter for days. I never got around to making salsa or sauce, and before long, they began to rot. I had to throw them out.

Because I didn't work hard for those tomatoes, it wasn't a priority for me to use them up. Now that we've started our own garden, I rarely let a single vegetable go to waste; I now know the effort that goes into growing each one. We value what we work hard to produce or achieve.

Work is part of our God-given purpose. How can you reframe your work as a gift from God? Do you need to shift your perspective toward work?
—B. R.

11. We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies.

Here, Paul focuses on a point initially raised in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, above. He had received reports that some individuals are not only refusing to work but are also actively interfering with the lives and work of others. Paul will have to deal with this problem more than once before the end of his ministry (1 Timothy 5:13). When some members choose to be idle and meddlesome, it burdens others and creates friction and discord. This internal strife weakens the church's witness to the outside world, undermining its mission and message (1 Thessalonians 4:11–12).

Unity among Christians is a primary goal of the New Testament church (Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Ephesians 4:13; etc.). Church leaders are responsible for fostering and maintaining this unity, sometimes requiring them to address disruptive behavior directly (2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 2:15).

12. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat.

This verse has the cure for those who are “bushybodies”: stable, meaningful work. Work is a connection between God and humanity, and it should be conducted in a holy manner (Colossians 3:23–24). The ultimate goal is for everyone who is

physically able to work to provide for themselves, summarized as *earn the food they eat*.

Conclusion

A. Embracing Work

As fraught with difficulty as work may be in the fallen world we currently inhabit, work remains good. Given as a gift to humanity prior to the fall—and part of our purpose—we are invited to work alongside our heavenly Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit enables us to walk obediently, joining our worker God in his good work. The old axiom “We don't work to live; we live to work” helps engage our thinking on this.

Paul reminds us that work serves both to meet our own material needs and the needs of those around us. Beyond earning a living, we can leverage our work and the resources it provides to serve others.

Through our work, we follow the example of our Creator and set a positive example for others to follow. Ignoring this example can lead to disunity and a weakening of the church, diminishing its testimony to the world. However, when the church works together and supports those who are weak and unable to work, unity is strengthened, God is glorified, and the church presents a powerful testimony to the world.

What Do You Think?

Do you agree with the axiom, “We don't work to live; we live to work”? Why, or why not?

Digging Deeper

How has this lesson reframed your perspective and attitude toward work?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for reminding us why we are called to work. Help us embrace this message and maintain a positive attitude toward the work you have given us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Those who are able should engage in good work.