THE DIGNITY OF WORK

by James Tollerson

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In the beginning of God’s dealings with man on earth man was placed in the Garden of Eden “to cultivate it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). God’s plan called for man to work. After Adam’s sin his work was more difficult. We read, “Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles shall it grow for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread” (Genesis 3:17-19). From the very beginning, work was a part of God’s plan for mankind.

From one end of the Bible to the other it is obvious that God approves the ownership of property and the honorableness of work. In giving the Ten Commandments, God indicated both of these principles. For example, the fourth commandment reads,

“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 of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male servant or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you” (Exodus 20:8-10).

Ordinarily, when we read this passage we think of the day of worship that came each week. It is true that God intended for his children under the Law of Moses to reserve each Sabbath Day for worship, just as he expects those of the Christian era to let the first day of the week be a day of worship. However, it is also quite clear that the other six days are to be given over to honorable, meaningful work. This is clearly declared in the sentence “Six days you shall labor. . . . The eighth commandment requires, “You shall not steal.” The tenth commandment teaches, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:15, 17). Both of these passages show that mankind is not to take that which belong another, but is to provide for himself that which he needs.

All this is in the context of putting God first, our fellowmen second, and material things last. The apostle John wrote, “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If any one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). In Luke 12:15 Jesus said, “For not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.” Possessions are not to rule our lives. God comes first and our fellowmen second, but there is a place for things. Honorable work has to do with these material possessions.

I. THE CURSE OF LAZINESS

I would like to sound a very strong warning. In America in our time, there is a great danger in the popular trend toward expecting something for nothing. Thousands of people seem to be drifting in the direction of striving to get something without working for it. This is a wrong attitude. It will be a curse to an individual and to the nation as a whole. Notice four areas of life in which this seems to be a growing, dangerous trend.

Helping the Poor

It is certainly right and proper that Christian people should help those who cannot help themselves. This is taught in the Scriptures. Those who may need help may be orphans, sick people, elderly people, or those who have faced some special emergency. However, sometimes in our efforts to care for those in need, we have encouraged idleness and a lack of responsibility. Some-
times, our public welfare programs and programs of unemployment insurance have encouraged people not to work and provide for themselves when they were physically and mentally capable of doing work. One employer has told me of a man who came to his firm and asked for a job. He was given the promise of a job and asked to report at 7:00 a.m. the following morning. He reported at the specified time, but he did not go with the men into the plant to work. He waited until 8:00 a.m. and talked with the employer in his office. He said simply, “I have decided not to take the job. I have compared the wages that I would get with my present welfare benefits and have taken into consideration what I would have to pay in taxes. When I add the cost of coming to work and other incidentals, I am better off not to work at all.” We do not wish to imply that the motives behind the setting up of the programs were such as would hinder initiative and foster idleness, but sometimes this has been the result. Our national welfare program has become alarming—both because of its enormous size and also because of what it does to the people who are on it.

When I read in the public press newer and stronger demands for “a guaranteed annual wage,” I could not help but feel that thousands might be encouraged to take the government bounty rather than to work for their material needs. What I wish to speak for is a training program in which all people capable of holding a job would be given the necessary training for such jobs, and then, job opportunities would be made available for these people. This would be a blessing to the individuals involved and would strengthen the nation rather than weaken it. Those who are not capable of holding jobs, by reason of mental or physical limitations, would, of course, be cared for by those who are strong, just as we care for babies and for the elderly.

Contests
In an entirely different area, there exists another encouragement to the people of our nation to get excited about receiving something for nothing. During the past few years it seems that many major companies have mounted extensive programs of luring customers by rich prizes to lucky participants. We are told about the various kinds of cars that we may win. We are promised a chance at vacation trips, desirable consumer goods of one kind or another, or vast amounts of cash. It seems that the quality of the product being sold has been crowded out of the advertising copy in favor of getting customers by promises of a chance to win a fabulous prize.

Sales promotions by mail are constantly telling us that if we will order a certain object, we may also win an expensive prize. The copy often runs, “You have already won a prize worth ______.” In one of these recent promotions the height of the ridiculous was reached as each potential winner was told that he would have a choice, if he should win first prize, of taking $18,000 in cash, or of having a mountain given to him. It was explained that the small mountain would bear his name and that it would be his for all time to come. It is not wrong to accept a prize, but it is dangerous and degrading to the population to be confronted with one contest after another offering this or that, until the people are hypnotized and excited about getting “something for nothing.”

Speculation in Stock
It is certainly not wrong to invest in a business enterprise. The investment of capital is the means of helping a company expand and is not basically different from investing one’s own talent or time. However, it is a different thing when one buys and sells stocks, not as an investment in a company, but simply as an avenue through which he hopes “to get rich quick.” He hopes to be clever enough to get into the market at a low level and get out at a higher level, leaving someone else to ride the stock down. This appears to be wild speculation or manipulation of stock that seems to me too closely akin to gambling. The dangerous element is the desire to get rich quick, a desire to get something for nothing at someone else’s expense.

Leisure Time
There is a growing trend in America toward more and more free time. As the work week is shortened, man will have much more leisure time. This can be a great blessing or a great curse. God did not create man to have blocks of idle time. As the old adage says, “An idle mind is the devil’s workshop.” God has given us talents and abilities which He expects us to use. A short
work week may be a blessing in that it allows a working man time to work constructively at other things. If it is spent simply in lavishing luxurious pleasures upon one’s self, it will destroy the individual and the nation as well. Work is a blessing, but vast amounts of idle time are a curse.

II. THE DIGNITY OF WORK

One of my closest friends tells this interesting story about work: “My father believed that ‘an idle brain was the devil’s workshop.’ He used everything at his disposal to see that I always had a job. One summer a farmer hired me at one dollar per day to drive his tractor. I learned my own father was paying my salary just to keep me busy. At the time I thought my dad was just plain dumb. . . . It is easy to see now that a boy plowing from sunup to sundown could not get in much trouble. Work and trouble, like gasoline and water, just does not mix.”

Judge Leon McCord, in his book *I Believe in Man* made these penetrating observations out of his rich background of experience:

> For twelve years I have been committing men and women to penal institutions. In that time nearly every crime worth the naming has walked into the courthouse where I work. I have often been called upon to name the mother of crime. I answer without hesitation—idleness.

> Nine out of every ten criminals, long before they arm themselves with pistols and blackjacks, jimmies and nitro-glycerin, carry, concealed about their persons—idleness.

> . . . Our penal institutions are being filled today by men and women, a large majority of whom do not know how to work and have never worked. They were idlers and loafers before they were criminals.

> An army of splendid children is just now marching through our public schools. Fine, upstanding young folk they are. If so minded, one can easily pick out from that long line the coming failures. You have only to select the ones who have no tasks to perform, no work to do when school is out. It is not enough that they know their lessons, make the grades, and pass. All this is good, but an education is not complete unless one knows how to hold to the task when it grows hard, when the hours seem long, and the body cries out for rest and repose.

> The boys who know the value of a holiday off, who have toiled until bitter bread seems sweet, will be the ones who will take the places of responsibility in the future. They will be found on the jury, and not before the jury.

> Work and prayer—this is an unbeatable combination, one that will enable a man to see clearly that God is the Great Provider of our every need.

> Just here we wish to turn to the Scriptures. Paul wrote,

> . . . But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need (1 Thessalonians 4:10-12).

The quiet, solid life involves working with the hands in order that Christians may be well respected by those outside the church and also that Christians may have need of nothing.

> Again Paul wrote,

> For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example; because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, 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 might not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, that you might follow our example. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: If anyone will not work, neither let him eat. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread (2 Thessalonians 3:7-12).

While at Corinth Paul labored with Aquilla and Priscilla making tents, supporting himself rather than being a burden upon the brethren. Honorable work is always commended in the Scriptures. In 2 Thessalonians 3, we find the emphatic sentence “If anyone will not work, neither let him eat.” This means that every able-bodied, mentally capable person must work. This is God’s will. Yet again Paul wrote, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8). By honorable work we are to support ourselves and our families.

> Let me point out five basic values of good, honest, productive work.

> Work provides the necessities of life. For ourselves and for others, honest work will provide food, clothing, shelter, and the other necessities of life. The worker even has something to share
with those who are in need. Remember the words “Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing that is good, that he may have where of to give to him that hath need” (Ephesians 4:28).

Work renders a service to others. The farmer, the manufacturer, the merchant, the doctor, and countless others provide necessary services for their fellowmen.

Work brings personal maturity and development. The pioneers who settled the great American continent were hard working people who felled trees, cleared land, planted crops, built houses, and all the rest. They grew and developed through their hard work.

Work prevents the temptations of idleness. Those who are busy doing some constructive work do not have time to fall into the temptations that have caused so many people to succumb. Hard working people are honest, thrifty, God-fearing, moral, and generally free from the weaknesses of those who are generally idle.

Work brings satisfaction. There are few joys as deeply satisfying as a job well done, when that job is a benefit to one’s fellowmen.

CONCLUSION

Even the matter of being saved involves doing something. We can never earn our salvation. Salvation is God’s gift. Christ said, “So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done” (Luke 17:10). Paul also wrote, “... For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

Even though this is true, the fact remains that there is something that we must do in order to be saved. There are certain conditions upon which the Lord gives us salvation. Faith in God and in His Son Jesus Christ is one condition which we must meet. There must also be repentance from our past sins, the confession of the name of our Lord, and the putting on of Christ in baptism. Over and over, the New Testament indicates that these acts are our part in becoming Christians. After being born into God’s family we must live and work as Christians. Ultimately, we all look forward to hearing our Lord say, “Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21). The book of Revelation has these words: “‘Write, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!”’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them’” (Revelation 14:13).