

Lord of Our Labor



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 1:27, 28; 2:15; 3:17-19; Matt. 25:14-30; Acts 10:36-43; Eph. 4:28; 2 Thess. 3:6-12.*

Memory Text: “‘He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.’” (*Luke 3:11, NKJV*).

Key Thought: Those who live under the lordship of Christ will demonstrate excellence and productivity in their labor. The work of their minds and hands will bring honor to God and blessings to those around them.

The dignity of labor. We are called, as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, to set our minds on things above, not on things on the earth. However, at the same time, God also calls us to be productive in our daily labor. Commenting on Christ's parable of the talents, Ellen White notes that “God has called us to serve Him in the temporal affairs of life. Diligence in this work is as much a part of true religion as is devotion. . . . Every man and woman who is truly converted will be a diligent worker.”—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 343.

In this week's lesson, we will explore the gift of work for those who have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We will discover that excellence and productivity in our work are important parts of our witness as citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 3.*

The Gift of Labor in Eden (*Gen. 1:27, 28; 2:15*).

Contrary to a common notion, daily labor is not one of the negative consequences of living in a sinful world (the common *notion* that labor itself is bad, though, *is* a consequence of sin). Meaningful labor for the human family was part of God's original and perfect plan.

What work assignment did the Creator give to our first parents? *Gen. 1:27, 28; 2:15*. **What was the nature of their work? Why should there be work in a sinless, perfect environment? What does the existence of work in such a context tell us about the idea of work in general?**

The Garden of Eden was a flawless environment. All creation rejoiced together in perfect harmony. In this idyllic setting, God gave Adam and Eve a meaningful work assignment, both for the Garden itself and for the world in general. Their whole relationship with the created world around them wasn't limited to just enjoying it; they were, rather, to interact with it. In fact, they were to rule over the created world; thus, in a sense, they were gardeners-rulers, working in their garden home while ruling over the earth and the things in it. Created out of that world, they were distinctly part of it, working in it as laborers while at the same time given rule over it, an interesting combination of roles, to be sure.

Given the nature of humanity and our capacity to grow, to learn, to be changed, why do you think God wanted our original parents, even in a sinless environment, to work and to have responsibilities?

In what ways does your labor, whatever kind it is, offer you opportunities to grow, to mature, to learn? What could you do in order to take advantage of whatever opportunities your work does offer you toward growth and maturity?

The Challenges of Labor After the Fall

(Gen. 3:17-19).

The entrance of sin into our world resulted in numerous negative consequences. The most devastating consequence was death. Long before Adam and Eve experienced death personally, they would witness the horrifying consequence of their sin in the death of Abel at the hands of his brother Cain. Sin not only affected the human family; it also affected the environment.

Read prayerfully and carefully Genesis 3:17-19. How did the entrance of sin affect the environment and our interaction with it? How do you understand what God is saying in these texts? Were these changes purely a punishment of sin, or were they the natural results of sin?

It is not clear how much time elapsed after God created the world before sin marred the perfect creation. Undoubtedly, Adam and Eve enjoyed the privilege of laboring in that wonderful setting. With the entrance of sin, however, the environment became harsh and hostile. Our first parents were now compelled to labor by the sweat of their brow. The cycle of deterioration and death in the natural environment would be a constant reminder of their own mortality as well as a stark contrast to the Eden they had once enjoyed.

A quick reading of those texts sounds as if the Lord was being very harsh in punishing them. Yet, if you read below the surface, what else can you see here? In other words, in what ways could the Lord have used these changes to help Adam and Eve?

“It was God’s purpose to alleviate by toil the evil brought into the world by man’s disobedience. By toil the temptations of Satan might be made ineffectual, and the tide of evil stayed. And though attended with anxiety, weariness, and pain, labor is still a source of happiness and development, and a safeguard against temptation. Its discipline places a check on self-indulgence, and promotes industry, purity, and firmness. Thus it becomes a part of God’s great plan for our recovery from the fall.”—Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People*, p. 213.

What examples have you seen, if any, of how work can be used for our spiritual benefit?

Productivity in Our Labor *(2 Thess. 3:6-12).*

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 and then answer the following questions:

1. Whom should the people avoid? _____

2. Whose example should they follow, and in what? _____

3. What reason did Paul give for the fact that he and his fellow evangelists worked to earn their bread? _____

4. What was Paul's attitude toward those who refused to work?

5. How would you sum up the essence of what Paul is writing here? What principles are here that we, today, should apply to our own lives and how we relate to work and to those who don't work?

6. In what kind of situations might those who are not working be excused for not working? What, then, is your responsibility toward such a person? _____

When we are productive in our labor, we are blessed in many ways. We are able to provide for the needs of our families and loved ones. Our productivity also brings honor to the Lord we serve. Whether we are ploughing a field, caring for the sick, working in the home, or operating a small business, we can use this time of labor for the honor of our Lord and the blessing of those around us. Such is the attitude of an individual who is living under the lordship of Christ.

“If any would not work, neither should he eat.” How do you relate to this admonition with the whole idea of grace, of forgiveness, of treating people better than they deserve, just as Christ has treated us better than we deserve?

Laboring for the Benefit of Others

What principle regarding labor did the apostle Paul share with the believers in Ephesus? *Eph. 4:28.*

The apostle Paul practiced what he preached. Speaking to the Ephesian elders before leaving Miletus, he said, “ ‘I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and *for those who were with me*’ ” (*Acts 20:33, 34, NKJV, emphasis supplied*). Paul’s teaching in words and life reminds us of the counsel of another servant of our Lord Jesus Christ. John the Baptist challenged his hearers to let the fruits of their labors bless the lives of those around them: “ ‘He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise’ ” (*Luke 3:11, NKJV*).

Read James 2:14-20. What important message does he have for those who profess to be saved by faith alone? How does this counsel help us understand what saving faith is?

What’s fascinating about James’s words is the kind of works he links with faith. We often tend to think of works as not stealing, not killing, not breaking the Sabbath, and so forth, which, of course, are all part of what it means to follow Christ. Yet, James here talks about something else, that of taking care of those around us who are in need. Just saying nice things to them or just offering a prayer for them isn’t enough. James is giving us an example of the kind of works that reveal true faith. As Christians, we need to be careful that we don’t, as did the Pharisees, get caught up in “ ‘tithing of mint and anise’ ” while ignoring the weightier matters of the law, “ ‘judgment, mercy, and faith’ ” (*Matt. 23:23*).

Helping the poor requires two things: time and money. How much of your time, how much of your money, are you willing to spend helping those in need around you? What does your answer say about the kind of faith you have?

Laboring as We Await Our Lord's Return *(Matt. 25:14-30)*

The Lord Jesus Christ told a parable that emphasized the importance of using every resource to its full potential while we await His return.

Read the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30. What lessons can we learn for our lives today? What message is Jesus giving to us?

“There is not one human being to whom is not committed some talent, not one but has a work to do for the Lord. Not one is to be excused. Not one is to remain in idleness; but every man is required to do his best; the talents entrusted to him are to be used in consecrated service for the Master.”—Ellen G. White, “Redeem the Time Because the Days Are Evil,” *Review and Herald*, April 21, 1896.

What’s fascinating, too, about this parable is that it comes right after the parable of the foolish virgins (*see Matt. 25:1-13*), which has an emphasis more on the life of faith, devotion, and prayer, which leads to the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Right after comes the parable of the talents, which deals with the active Christian life, not of just praying and believing and studying but of outward work for the Master.

The principle here, though, doesn’t have to be limited only to our work for the Lord. In all our work, all our labor, we should seek to go about our tasks with faithfulness and diligence as did the faithful servants.

How do we understand this parable in light of the concept of salvation by faith alone? (*Rom. 3:28, 4:1-13, Gal. 2:16*).

Our faith will be revealed in our works, in what we do with the gifts God has given us. We cannot separate our Christianity from how we live; and how we live cannot be separated from how we work, how we do our job, whatever it is. In the workplace, faithful, thorough, diligent, and honest labor can be a powerful expression of our faith, as well as a powerful witness to the God we serve.

If all someone knew about your faith was from how you went about your work, what impressions would they likely receive about your faith?

Further Study: See also *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 359, 360.

Some individuals are called to full-time service for God. They have the privilege and responsibility of devoting their complete attention to kingdom business. Ellen White spoke of this call to full-time ministry in a letter written at the beginning of the last century: "Many young men and women now engaged in secular labor will feel earnestly stirred to give themselves to the service of God, to become channels of light. . . . Let these be given an opportunity to obtain an education for the work of God. And let all God's workers help and cheer and encourage one another with their prayers and faithful conversation, impressing one another with the dignity and responsibility of the work in which they are engaged."—Letter 66, 1901, *Manuscript Releases*, p. 44.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** How does the Sabbath fit in with this whole question of labor? What message does the Sabbath tell us regarding our labor?
- 2** How do you understand the basic message of this week's study with the words in Galatians 6:2?
- 3** In every generation, God raises up women and men who honor Him in their labor. Think about your own culture. Who comes to mind as an individual whose labor has brought glory to God and blessing to others?
- 4** Is there anyone in your own church family out of work right now? If so, what can you do as a church community to help (1) provide for his or her family's immediate needs and (2) find the person work?
- 5** "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (*1 Tim. 5:8*). As a class, discuss the implications of this text in regard to how you would treat someone who refuses to provide for his own family.

The Boy Who Heard God Speak

John McGhee

Boldera sat on his pony watching the clouds scurry across the Mongolian sky. The hot August sun beat down on the treeless plain where his 200 thirsty sheep bleated their protest. The 12-year-old guided his pony around the herd to turn them away from the nearby railroad tracks. He was not willing to lose even one sheep.

Later, as the sheep drank at a spring, Boldera sat astride his pony and spoke into the wind: "Creator of the sky and the earth, talk to me; teach me about life."

Boldera again rounded up a few sheep who had surged toward the railroad tracks. He noticed a scrap of paper lying on the tracks. Sliding off his pony, he picked up the paper and read its words, "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. . . . When he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep. I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:4-7, NIV).

Other scriptures on that dirty, wrinkled scrap of paper spoke of God's desire for Boldera to repent. Boldera knelt in the tall brown prairie grass and prayed to this God whom he did not yet know. "Creator of the sky, You have spoken to me. I repent and ask You to forgive my sins. Carry me on Your shoulders as You did that lost sheep. Be my Shepherd."

God led Boldera from his perch atop his pony to the city of Darkhan, Mongolia, where he met other Christian believers. There he learned more about the Savior to whom he had prayed. He gave his life to Christ and pledged to follow Him wherever He led.

Four years later Boldera continues to worship God in Darkhan. Today he is a soft-spoken teenager, leader of his 43-member Youth Alive club.

Boldera still has that tattered scrap of paper that led him to God. And he has a special burden to reach the other Mongolian shepherd boys with the gospel. He wants them to know the Creator and recognize His voice when He speaks.

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