

Work That Testifies

Jason Abbott

How do you think about work? Not too many of us think about it as a blessing or as a way to worship. Just think of how our songs describe and fashion it.

- Dolly Parton laments that she has to work her nine to five—“Workin' 9 to 5, / What a way to make a livin' / Barely gettin' by, / It's all takin' and no givin'.”¹
- Wynn Stewart gives us a thoroughly negative view of work when he sings—“Another day, another dollar daylight comes I'm on my way / Another day, another dollar workin' my whole life away.”²
- Or, who could forget the vision of paradise Harry McClintock fashions for us in the song “The Big Rock Candy Mountains”? He sings—“I'ma goin' to stay / Where you sleep all day, / Where they hung the Turk / That invented work / In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.”³

(I could've quoted Loverboy lyrics as well, but that would've been cruel.)

In the end, we have to admit that our views of work are often very negative. We don't see it as good and even worshipful. But, indeed, that's what our work is— an act of obedient worship.

Let's see how in our final study in the book of 2 Thessalonians.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

⁶In 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. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, ⁸nor 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. ⁹We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as

¹ Dolly Parton, “9 to 5,” RCA Records: 1980.

² Wynn Stewart, “Another Day, Another Dollar,” Smith & Company Records: 1964.

³ Harry McClintock, “The Big Rock Candy Mountains,” Mercury: 2000.

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 busybodies. ¹² Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. ¹³ And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.

¹⁴ Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. ¹⁵ Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer.

¹⁶ Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

¹⁷ I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.

¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

You know, through all of Paul’s encouragements to work and all his warnings against being idle, you probably weren’t thinking: “Oh, how affectionate he’s being. Paul is so driven by love for them.” Those thoughts very likely didn’t come to mind, but they should have, because these encouragements and warnings are being fueled by a gospel love and compassion. In essence, Paul’s instructions, in this final section of the letter, can be summed up in two very simple propositions—(1st) Love works, and (2nd) Love warns. Again, love works and warns. Let’s see how.

1. Love works (vv. 6-10).

So, a little background is important as we begin. This isn’t the first time Paul has had to address the issue of idleness or laziness in Thessalonica. In his first letter, he wrote similar instructions to them. There, the apostle urges them to—“warn those who are idle and disruptive” (1 Thessalonians 5:14). In fact, this command to work originally emerges in a section of the letter which is all about the love and the witness of the church; it’s all about how they can care for one another as well as reflect Jesus to an unbelieving world.

Just listen to what Paul says there. Listen to how work is tied to Christian love as well as the church's gospel witness. The apostle doesn't dissect these three things but keeps them together. They go together. He writes this.

Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody (1 Thessalonians 4:9-12).

Paul connects their love to their work to their witness. Do you want to love? Then work! Do you want to witness? Then work! Work is one of the primary ways that we can both love one another and witness to unbelievers. Do you believe that? Do you look at work that way—as a way to love, as a way to witness?

Paul did. In fact, his love and his witness (to many of the churches he planted) was communicated thru his work. That's the first thing he reminds us of right here. He says remember my example.

- Paul and his fellow workers “were not idle” while there (v. 7).
- They didn't take handouts from the Thessalonians but worked “night and day” so that they wouldn't be “a burden” (v. 8).
- What was the point of all this? It was so they could be “a model” or a witness to the believers there of Christlike, sacrificial love (v. 9).

Friends, Paul's was a labor of love. He had the right to take pay, but he didn't because he wanted them to experience God's grace and love. Therefore, he worked sacrificially while with the Thessalonians. Christ's love inspired and drove his work. Love works. And, the work of love is a witness.

Have you ever thought about the work ethic of Jesus? I mean not just his work during the three years of ministry—not just his salvific work—but every job he did? The chores he did as a child. The assignments he did for synagogue. What he built while a carpenter. Have you ever imagined how Jesus of Nazareth did all these jobs? How the incarnate Son of God built a table or did his homework?

Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). The fullness of God dwells in him (Colossians 1:19). Do you think the divine love resident in Jesus Christ would build cruddy tables or cut corners on homework? No way!

But why not? Well, because, we know deep down in our hearts that love works and that perfect love works perfectly. We know building a shoddy table for someone isn't loving. We know cutting corners on homework isn't giving the teacher our best; it's not loving. We know that divine love wouldn't do this. And, therefore, we know that we shouldn't do it either.

Friends, in our hearts, we know love works. We know that real love isn't lazy and doesn't freeload. It labors and does what's good.

(When I was a kid, I loved sports. I mean I loved them. Not just playing games but practices too. In fact, I would go out on summer days all by myself and practice for hours—just me and a basketball or a soccer ball. During high school, I would run to the soccer fields (which were a couple miles from my house), practice all kinds of skill-sets in the heat of the day, and, then, run home again. I did this all the time. I chose to do this. I wanted to do it...*because I loved the game!*)

And, people would see me doing this. They would see me running to the fields with my ball tucked under my arm. They'd see me dribbling around the soccer park. They'd see me shooting and juggling. They'd see me sweating and working all day to get better. And, that was proof of my love for the game. People could see my love through my work. It was a testimony to them.

Now consider the alternative to this. What if I never wanted to work at sports? What if I sat around all summer long playing video games and munching junk food? What if I complained at practices and cut corners on drills? What if I showed up late for games? What would people see then? What would my testimony be then?)

Friends, the apostle is concerned about the church's testimony. Paul is worried because there are some in that community who are taking advantage of their brothers and sisters in Christ. They are freeloaders. These aren't those who are unable to work but those who are able to work yet refuse. And, their behavior testifies very clearly. It tells the world how little they care for the church. It shows a serious lack of love for the people of God and, thus, for God himself.

So, Paul is concerned about this. This isn't a minor problem; it's a serious one. The unity of this congregation is in danger, and the witness of the church is at stake. As Jesus taught during his earthly ministry, it is our love as believers for one another which will testify and prove that we follow him (John 13:35).

Friends, when you work, you are working for the Lord. You're doing a career for the Lord. Your designing or teaching or creating or cleaning or keeping the peace or managing or parenting children for the Lord. The money you earn is for the Lord. The respect you show your coworkers is for the Lord. I could go on and on and on. Here's the point—*your love should work*.

If you love the Lord, then you will love your neighbor. If you love the Lord, then you will love your church family. And, you will work hard at whatever you do, so that your work will testify to the love of God in you. *Friends, love works!*

Well, let's look at our final proposition.

2. Love warns (vv. 11-16).

Church discipline is, perhaps, the most unfashionable of all biblical mandates. Most churches don't even try anymore. If a church does try it, most people run away from it. There are far too many churches around—who aren't asking any questions, who just want warm bodies in the seats—to go thru the hard process of repentance and restoration. So, people just run from it.

But, church discipline is an exercise in love. That's the thing we've forgotten. Love is the point. Love warns those in danger. Look again at what Paul says.

We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good. Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer (vv. 11-15).

What's the focus of the warning to these "idle and disruptive" people (v. 11)? What's the goal? The goal is to have them as a healthy part of the fellowship again. The warning's aim is to steer them away from their self-centered, unhealthy behavior

and back into the loving unity of the church. The point isn't to hurt these individuals. The point is to help them because (as Paul points out) these people aren't our enemies but our Christian brothers and sisters, whom we want back in the family (v. 15).

Thus, we warn them (even sternly!) *because* we love them. Love warns.

Whenever Natalie and I were newly married, we spent a summer babysitting for our pastor and his wife. They had three young children—Marie, Sam, and Paul. Their family was like our 2nd family. Mark and Nina did our premarital counseling, and Mark officiated at our wedding. We would often eat meals over at their house. And, when we decided to go to seminary, Mark and Nina were key in our decision to attend Trinity. So, in a sense, they even helped bring us to First Free.

Anyway, during the summer, Natalie and I would often take the kids for walks around Jefferson City. There was an especially popular market called Bob's Market where we would take the kids to get a candy or an ice cream. They loved going there. It was only about a mile walk roundtrip. However, we had to walk along a busy road and cross a fairly busy intersection to get there.

Well, one day as we were heading home, Sam (who was probably around eight at the time) was asserting his independence a bit and walking ahead of everyone else. He was not really heeding our encouragements to slowdown and walk closer to us, and he kept increasing the distance. This began to make me nervous. Then, suddenly, I heard an engine start up, and I saw the reverse-lights of a car that he was just about to walk behind flash. And so, I panicked and roared out—with the very beginnings of what would ultimately become my dad voice—"Sam Kiekhaefer stop right there!" And, he stopped in his tracks.

Sam is an Air Force Academy graduate, yet still recalls that moment distinctly. My warning impacted him. The urgent concern in that violent scream impacted him. He will likely always remember it. But, how he remembers it has certainly changed. Back then, it was a fearful scream. The sound of my voice—of my urgent warning—scared him into stopping. It didn't seem kind then. It wasn't pleasant in the moment. I can guarantee he didn't like it.

But now, some 20-years later, Sam knows it was a scream of care and concern. He knows it was a warning in love. What Sam couldn't see then; he surely sees now. Love warns. Love disciplines. Because, love cares enough to do so.

First Free, it's my prayer that we'll be a church that loves one another well— loves one another well enough to warn our brothers and sisters when they are in sin and loves one another enough to be warned when we sin. Both will require humility and much work, but this is also work that testifies and points to Jesus.