

# What the Bible Says About Work & Laziness

We hear people talk about work often. Someone might say, “I had a hard day at work,” “I am so tired from working,” or “I wish our vacation was next week.” Some people are addicted to work. But most people dream about retirement and the opportunity to rest or do whatever they desire. They wish they could travel, fish, hunt, see the national parks, or take a cruise. Some just wish they could stop working permanently and stay at home. I think Don Herold captured this attitude when he made this quaint statement,

Work is the greatest thing in the world, so we should always save some of it for tomorrow.<sup>1</sup>

In his view, we should never work so hard that we finish our tasks today. Oh, we should work, but not too hard. Robert Frost said this about work,

The world is filled with willing people; some willing to work, the rest willing to let them [to let them work].<sup>2</sup>

We understand this. We see this in the secular world and in

the work for Christ. I love a comment that Jerome K Jerome made about work. He said,

I like work; it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours.<sup>3</sup>

All these quotes capture the attitude of many people about work. They would like to take a break, and others just want to be lazy.

King Solomon hated work because it was painful. He understood that the accomplishments of life were meaningless at the end of life. In Ecclesiastes 2:17, he said,

So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the

sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind. Ecclesiastes 2:17 (NASB)

In verse 22 of the same chapter he added,

For what does a man get in all

his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? Ecclesiastes 2:22 (NASB)

In chapter 3, verse 9 he added,



1. Mark Water. The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations. Baker Books. 1995. p. 1131.

2. Ibid. p. 1130.

3. Ibid. p. 1131.

What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils?  
Ecclesiastes 3:9 (NASB)

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)

Chapter 5 and verse 16 says,

So what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? Ecclesiastes 5:16 (NASB)

What is the answer to his three questions? He gives us the answer in three different passages. They are Ecclesiastes 2:24-25; 3:13 and 5:19-20. But I will just focus on the first passage, Ecclesiastes 2:24-25.

There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? Ecclesiastes 2:24-25 (NASB)

His answer is that work is bad. So, just tell yourself that your work is great and have as much pleasure as you can. This is the most common view of people in the world, and it is increasingly on display in our lifetime. Jesus warned us that in Matthew 24:37-38 and Luke 17:22-32 that the world will be given to the pursuit of pleasure in the last days. This was also true just before the flood in Genesis 6-7. 2 Timothy 3:1-2 says that in the last days people will be lovers of pleasure. We see it today everywhere.

In sharp contrast we rarely use the word lazy today because we do not consider it nice to say that someone is lazy. Therefore, we might say they are not very productive. We soften the truth.

**OUR STUDY.** This brings us to our study which is from 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15. Our study has four parts: “The Command” (v. 6), “The Example” (v. 7-9), “The Principle” (v. 10-13), and “The Clarification” (v. 14-15).

**COMMAND TO AVOID BEING LAZY.** The first part of the study is “The Command to Avoid Being Lazy.” It is found in verse 6. Paul wrote these words to the believers in Thessalonica,

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus

In verse 6 Paul reveals a problem that existed in the church in the city of Thessalonica. Notice that he commands them to “keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life.” The Greek word that Paul uses for “unruly” is *ataktos*. It was a military term that had the idea of someone who was out of rank or “out of place.” Later the word had the meaning of someone who was “lazy,” “idle,” or “refusing to work.” So, what was the problem? Some believers in the church were lazy and refused to work. Now there are people both inside our churches and outside our churches who are lazy too! They work little, but they want much. They just enjoy being at home and do not mind asking for your money or the money donated to the church. They seek a life of leisure at our expense. When they need help, they do not mind asking for financial help.

Now Paul is not talking about people who cannot work due to a physical disability, illness, or some other issue that prevents them from being able to work. He is discussing people who can work, but are not very motivated to work, and those who never do any work. I have spoken with people who are not motivated to look for work. They have excuses why they cannot work, and they eagerly ask the church for money donated by others.

Next, notice that Paul commands these believers to “keep away” from these lazy believers. The Greek word he used for “keep away” is *stello*. It means to “purposely avoid associating with someone.” We could say, “to shun,” or “to avoid.” This helps us understand that Paul wanted these believers to intentionally avoid any believer who refuses to work.

When Paul says, “according to the tradition which you received from us” he reminded them that he had already spoken about this problem in his first letter to them in 1 Thessalonians 4:10-12. When we read that passage, we learn that Paul had already talked to them about this problem before that occasion. He also alluded to this issue in 1 Thessalonians 5:14. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul did not discuss this problem very much. This means that the problem had become worse. The lazy believers had ignored his polite and brief instruction

in 1 Thessalonians. Now Paul gives them a command. If they will not work, avoid them.

Now, I have to admit this is a hard command. When I see men and women on the street begging for money, I always struggle with the decision whether to give them money. Here in Tucson an investigative report once discovered some years ago that there is a business that places people at street intersections at the beginning of the day, and then picks them up at the end of the day. The idea is for these individuals to beg for money throughout the day and then turn the money collected into the business and receive some of it back.

More than once I have helped a family that I knew were truly in need of money. We have given both to individuals and families. Paul's command is to not give to those who are not willing to work.

**EXAMPLE OF PAUL, SILVANUS, AND TIMOTHY.** The second part is found in 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9. Paul now gives them the example of himself, Silvanus, and Timothy. He said,

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 would 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, so that you would follow our example. 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9 (NASB)

Immediately, Paul urges them to follow his example. The Greek word that he uses for "follow our example" is *mimēomai*. It means to mimic. We are to mimic Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. You might ask, "What did they do?" Paul told them that they did not "act in an undisciplined manner." The Greek word he used for that phrase we have previously seen. It is *ataktos*. It means to be lazy. This means Paul said that the three of them were not lazy.

They did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it. Do you know anyone who has asked for your money? Maybe they had suggestions as to how you could spend your money on them. Paul said that they paid for anything they asked for and labored night and day. We usually say that we work day and night. I think Paul reversed the order because the three of

them ministered during the day and worked mainly at night, as well as during the day. It is fascinating that Paul used three different words associated with work. He said, "with labor and hardship we kept working night and day." He used "labor," "hardship," and "working." He did this to make the point that they really worked! He did not work fifteen minutes and then take a thirty-minute break. I remember the first job I had. I was working for a friend of the family and I kept asking him when it was time to quit. He rebuked me for being lazy.

Why did Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy do this? Paul gave these believers in Thessalonica two reasons. First, they did not want to be a burden by asking for money. The second reason was that they wanted to be a model or an example to the church. They enjoyed working for Christ.

Sadly, the welfare systems and social programs of the world are examples of just the opposite. They encourage laziness. They encourage people to ask for food without paying for it. They encourage people to not work, but to feel entitled to receive the money of other people. If there are people who truly cannot work, then God wants us to help them. There are many Scriptures that say that. But if a person does not want to work, then they should not eat. Paul's point was that he, Silvanus, and Timothy were not lazy. They worked night and day!

**PRINCIPLE OF WORKING.** The third part of Paul's message is, "The Principle of Working." Paul gives this principle in verses 10-13. Here are verses 10-11.

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. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. 2 Thessalonians 3:10-11 (NASB)

When Paul said that "we used to give you this order," he used the Greek *parangello*. He used the same word in verse 6. There it was translated as "command." This means that Paul is repeating the command that he gave in verse 6, and is now adding to it. Paul said, "No work—no eat." When he said that some among you are "leading an undisciplined life," he used the Greek *ataktos* again. This is the third time he has used a

variation of this word (v. 6, 7, and 11). It means to be lazy. Paul is talking about lazy believers again. He adds that they do not work, but act like busybodies. Paul uses a play on words. Essentially, Paul said that they did not want to do any work, but worked hard at meddling and interfering in the lives of other people. They impose themselves on others.

It is sad that so many people, including some believers, have the wrong idea of work. Many believers do not have a biblical concept of work. If they would read and study the Bible, they would learn that God has a different perspective about work and pleasure. Therefore, I want to give you four truths about work from God's perspective.

1) *God Works.* The first biblical truth about work is that God works. Just read the first verse of the Bible. Genesis 1:1 says,

**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1 (NASB)**

The word "created" reveals that God worked. We often do not stop to dwell on this verse very long and realize that God worked. Do a search sometime for the word "work" in the Psalms. You will discover that frequently we are told God works. Here is one of them,

**Great are the works of the LORD;  
They are studied by all who delight in them.  
Splendid and majestic is His work,  
And His righteousness endures forever.  
Psalms 111:2-3 (NASB)**

So, the first fact about work is that God, Himself, works. When we work, we are imitating God. Work is a high calling.

2) *Work is Commanded.* The second biblical truth about work is that God has commanded us to work. If we read the fourth of the Ten Commandments we are told,

**Six days you shall labor and do all your work . . . Exodus 20:9 (NASB)**

God has commanded us to work. In Genesis 2:2 we read,

**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. Genesis 2:2 (NASB)**

Just as He worked for six days, He wants us to work for six days, and then rest.

3) *Work is Good.* The next biblical truth should not be a surprise to us. It is found in Genesis 2:15,

**Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and tend it. Genesis 2:15 (NASB)**

What did God do? He gave Adam a task. God assigned him some work to do. Adam was to care for the plants in the Garden of Eden. This occurred before Adam and Eve sinned and the Fall occurred. That is, before sin entered the universe, God wanted Adam to work. The point is that work was and is a good thing. God had planned for us to work. It was not until after Adam sinned that work became difficult. The point is that even though work is painful and tiring, work is good.

4) *Work has a Reward.* The fourth biblical truth about work is there is a reward for working. Galatians 6:7 reminds us that we reap what we sow. Here is the verse,

**. . . whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. Galatians 6:7 (NASB)**

Job 15:31 echoes the same truth,

**Let him not trust in emptiness, deceiving himself;  
For emptiness will be his reward.  
Job 15:31 (NASB)**

Job says if we are content with doing nothing, then our reward is that we receive nothing.

Proverbs 12:27 captures what happens to those who value pleasure more than work. It says,

**A lazy man does not roast his prey,  
But the precious possession of a man is diligence.  
Proverbs 12:27 (NASB)**

That is, the lazy man chooses to not roast his meat. He wants someone else to do it for him. In contrast, the precious possession of a man is being industrious. We call it hard work. Working hard is more valued than laziness.

Proverbs 26:13-16 is a great summary of the lazy person. It says,

The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road!  
A lion is in the open square!"  
As the door turns on its hinges,  
So does the sluggard on his bed.  
The sluggard buries his hand in the dish;  
He is weary of bringing it to his mouth again.  
The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes  
Than seven men who can give a discreet answer.  
Proverbs 26:13-16 (NASB)

Thomas S. Monson summarizes these verses in Proverbs with,

Work will win when wishy washy wishing won't.<sup>4</sup>

Charles Kingsley once said,

Thank God - every morning when you get up that you have something to do which must be done, whether you like it or not. Being forced to work, and forced to do your best, will breed in you a hundred virtues which the idle never know.<sup>5</sup>

While I do not know if Calvin Coolidge was a Christian, he once made a very good statement about work. He said,

All growth depends upon activity. There is no development physically or intellectually without effort, and effort means work. Work is not a curse; it is the prerogative of intelligence, the only means to adulthood, and the measure of civilization.<sup>6</sup>

Every believer needs to understand that there is high honor

in work, for God works. He has commanded us to work. Work is good and there is a reward for working. That is why Paul rebuked those Christians who do not work or are always asking for help when they can work. Let's return to 2 Thessalonians 3 and read verses 12-13.

Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good. 2 Thessalonians 3:12-13 (NASB)

Now Paul commanded those who were lazy to do three things. First, they were to work just as Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy did and God did. Second, they were to work quietly without complaining. Third, they were to eat their own bread and not someone else's bread. That means they had to be content with what God had provided for them. Frankly, I think that is one of the major problems people have. They are not content with what God has provided for them. Some are not content that they have to work. Those who do work are not content with what God enables them to earn. They want more. Some are so unhappy with what God has given them that they complain and ask for others to give to them. I know individuals who are not content with what God has provided them. So, they try to manipulate others to provide things for them. On one side of the pendulum are individuals who do not like to work and are also not content with the rewards of not working—having little. On the other side of the pendulum are others who do work but still want more! Paul said in Philippians 4:11,

Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. Philippians 4:11 (NASB)

Therefore, Paul commanded these believers to work quietly and to be happy eating the bread that they earned. We must remember that work is a high privilege! God works! When we work, we imitate God.

Then Paul anticipated the discouragement of some hard-working believers who were torn with being manipulated by individuals who probably complained of not having such things as enough food or needing money for rent. He said,

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid. p. 1130.

“Do not grow weary of doing good.” Do not become discouraged with doing good. He is saying that we need to help those who are truly in need.

**CLARIFICATION OF THE COMMAND.** The fourth part of Paul’s message is a “Clarification of the Command” that Paul gave in verse 6. He said,

*If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 (NASB)*

Why does Paul tell us to pay special attention to those who are not willing to work? The answer is that it is a sin to be lazy!

Therefore, Paul tells us what to do. He says, “do not associate with him,” and then he adds the goal that he would be put to shame for being lazy. Finally, he says that we are to do this because he is a brother in the Lord. The goal is to restore him from his sin. In our modern day with so many different churches, this instruction is almost rendered ineffective. These sinning believers just leave the church and find another one. Nevertheless, this is God’s instruction for us.

**CONCLUSION.** This is a very important teaching about work and laziness. Every church has people who do not want to work but want what others have. They are not content with what God has given them. If they work little, God’s reward is little. If they work harder, God’s reward is more. It is a sin to not be happy with what God has given us! Hebrews 13:5 summarizes the attitude that we should have about work and our possessions with,

*Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU,” Hebrews 13:5 (NASB)*

The principle given to us from this passage is that work is a high privilege and we are not to be lazy! God works! When we work, we imitate God. When we enjoy working, we honor God.