

General Topics :: When work is not virtuous**When work is not virtuous - posted by theopenlife, on: 2010/3/22 19:03**

Some of you are aware that I am presently on a long bicycle ride, several thousand miles, and have been blessed to visit different churches and have time to read and pray more than usual.

During this time powerful waves of ideas have been altering my views on certain matters, beating new channels and reforming rock into different forms. Just as one may walk up and down several mountains in a straight path, and thereby go a farther distance than one who walked along the level of the foothills beside, even so these short days have been the occasion of great distances of change. I do not suppose the differences will be immediately evident or communicable, but time will distinguish the adjustments in my character.

In the meantime, your thoughts and prayers are greatly appreciated.

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22 March 2010
Forks, WA

On the frenetic culture of jobs and excessive money labor amongst all people, and in particular Christians in the United States.

Ever since the so-called Protestant work ethic was heralded and New England industry took root in the black soils of the Atlantic shore, there has been an American veneration of the prodigious work week, a sort of Puritanical admiration for practical diligence kneaded thriftily into abundant visible fortune. A day of rest is holy, and perhaps by the discipline with which the other five or six are set aside for work, the hours of employment are holier still. I have read that of all Democratic countries, Americans average the shortest vacations, the fewest relieved holidays, and amongst the longest work hours, despite being understood as generally the most fortunate and well-appointed people. I speak to the Western and particularly American Christians amongst this mass, because to such my experience is mostly confined. And I ask, for what are we working? Some have dressed our Marthaian business in a language waxing theological, quoting Luther on the sanctity of the common vocation, and pointing to the apparent blessings shed upon our Pilgrim forebears.

But I contend that work is not, taken in the abstract, necessarily virtuous. From the dressing of Eden to the stocks and trades of the present day, work has always been an eschatological type preceding the final rest of heaven. Labor was a sign, as it were, of Adam's probation to be followed with the reward of infallible uprightness and enduring peace. The tree of Life held no definite provision for the continuance of labor following success. Under sin, fields were made a curse of thorns and clay out from which sprouted as much sweat as wheat, grief as grain. To the children of Israel, Moses commanded six days of labor bespeaking such acts of righteousness as men fruitlessly work to receive everlasting life by, while the Sabbath alone was made for man and in that day not the thinnest twig was to be gathered.

How much of this Adamic probation and subsequent curse remains for the Christian, who in Christ has been forgiven all things, and for whom He has done all things? None of it! Why then, through twelve dozen hours of menial toil each week should a Christian, freed from the Law's employ for the wages of heaven, strive to typify the Mosaic shadow of personal righteousness attained through good works? Where is it written that the six days following our Lord's resurrection are to be occupied with the same form of mundane grinding and moiling at the money stone. It seems that Solomon's wisdom pounds upon deaf ears as he shouts with abandon, "Vanity! Under the sun all is vanity!"

Why do we labor so exhaustively at trade and tool for that which does not abide? For excessive warmth, for passing fashions more short lived than moths that eat them, and for over-indulgent habits which mar one's health and spirit, and rob one's neighbor of meaningful time shared in mutual improvements of the person, if not of his immediate food and safety? We work ten extra hours at the mill or office to afford a marginally finer bobble which itself is produced through the prostituted labors and resources of a desperate people on some other shore, out of our sight but not of God's. Have we not read the scripture, "with food and clothing," - such things as are expedient to a useful life - "let us therewith be content." Pursue not transitory pleasures and the pretense of rank, but bring permanence and value to your work by lifting its purpose up to heavenly ends.

One might contend that his many labors are for the good of others. He works much to give much, he says. I will not argue with his particular case; I do not know it and perhaps that is the truth. But why do we so easily assume that what the world needs is what the world works for, or that heavenly treasures are to be acquired through the same industries as earthly ones we are to shirk? If the treasures of earth are gained principally through tilling and trading produce of the earth, does it not follow that heavenly treasures are laid up primarily by the improvement and distribution of such things as have come from heaven? Worldly men are wise to labor with things of this world, gold and grist. How is it that we believers are insensible of the nature of our divine commission, to deal chiefly in gospel, in grace, in doctrine and charity? It would be good for us to plow our hearts more earnestly than our fields, to study the rearing of spiritual fruit with more interest than that which sells fast in Vanity Fair.

It would become us to be as eager to spend four years and exorbitant sums - were it necessary! - earning some degree of wisdom and self-discipline before fawning after those certificates of approval which men think so necessary to become better off, but which can to no certain degree assure we become better *men*. By our misjudgment of priorities and the misuse of time and money, we are both Degreed and degraded. I believe our costliest resource, time, might be better spent furnishing spirits with heavenly character, rather than piling more cheap furniture into shanty homes like kindling into a matchbox pitched on the edge of the fiery lake. The world has its material tools and is a slave to them. Let him who is a slave be content therein, but he that can be made free, let him use his freedom!

To be sure, to some extent labor continues for the believer as the providential means of his physical sustenance. Godly Abel had his flock as well as Cain his soil, and we reap only that we sow, by God's blessing. By our brow we pay taxes to the lifted rod, rendering to Caesar his imaginary dues and thereby pacifying the organized cudgel of greed which has never ceased to collect for the rebuilding of Babel as high as it will go. Like Peter, we cast a thin line into the sea, just enough menial work into the ocean of time, taking one fish and the coin therein. Providence assures us this much, a simple meal and to pay the required fees of man, but affirms we are nevertheless Sons and therefore exempt in the truest sense from customs imposed by the world upon what Christ Himself owns. We are content enough in the meantime to politely give them what they demand, like a calm ambassador stripped of his property by boisterous natives, knowing by a letter in his hand that offshore sits a fleet just come to level the rebellious upstarts and restore order.

There is also the Apostle's inspired stricture, who would have us work with our hands "that we might have to give" to those who have need; but one should not mistake to think others have need of such luxuries as we covet, or the many cluttering, cost-accruing conveniences of a well-appointed middle class, who are themselves poor debtors, either in fact to creditors or to the equally incessant anxieties and toils of property upkeep. By our charity we might then rob the indigent even of that which they once had, and by which they were wealthier than kings, of time, simplicity, and sobriety to contemplate the awful brevity and vanity of the present condition of the world. In the name of beneficence we have often loaded down the weary pilgrim with a material burden we ourselves could not carry, let alone run with upon an upward race to the loftiness of heavenly-mindedness, of sincere joy and present satisfaction in the Person of Christ. Can we say with the Psalmist, "Whom have I in heaven but Thou, O Lord, and there is none upon the earth I desire beside Thee"? Do we in fact go with the Patriarchs, seeking a city which has foundations, whose maker and builder is God?

For the Christian menial work is an exigency to be fitted to the actual needs of himself and others, not a pastime to let burgeon into something so time-absorbing as to distract from more permanent concerns as salvation and conformity to the character of God in Christ. Borrowing the language of the Confessions, the believer's time is chiefly to be spent in ways most conducive to the glorification and enjoyment of God. Suppose a man honestly assesses his many labors and asserts this is the case with him, I make no challenge. Let every man be convinced in his own conscience. But to those who knowingly while away their lives in mundane employments, both domestic and professional, because, in the last, to do so seems easier or merely conventional, or worse, because the pleasures of this world are so enticing, to such I commend dearly as unto myself, "let us seek those things which are above."

Paul labored with his hands that he might be chargeable to none, but his passion was not for momentary tents. It was in the beating of physical passions into submission, in keeping the body under, as it were, that through prayers and enterprises of the first magnitude he might "labor more than all" to make Christ's gospel freely known throughout the world; to erect for men not tents, but mansions of eternal dwelling. His wage was the glory of Christ. This he did most successfully not through long hours at the loom, however secondarily needful that was, but with long patience spent intentionally under the chisel of Christ's conforming word.

I say at last, the matter is not so much the time and act of any particular employment, but the intention beneath it all. Whatever we do, let us be persuaded we are doing it unto Christ and not our vanity, and in the best way possible. Let the s

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weat of our brow not fall for that which perishes, but to be laying up treasures of golden praise against that final day of payment to be heaped heaven-high over Christ's worthy crown.