

“The gift of work” 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

“Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

There are many misunderstandings when it comes to the questions of what Christianity is about and what it means to be a Christian. Today we read what Paul the apostle wrote to Christians in Thessaloniki, and the words of Paul can help us to reflect on one more of such misunderstandings.

Most of the people who have rejected God’s invitation to join in into this wonderful fellowship with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, most of them would think about Christianity as some sort of religious spirituality.

What does it mean? That Christianity has to do with our private inner religious feelings and sentiments. That it is about Christians trying to be spiritual people, satisfying their spiritual needs, or something along those lines.

Of course, that’s rubbish, but what it implies is that Christian faith has nothing to say on how we live in this world. It implies that it has no practical significance for our daily lives between Sundays.

Unfortunately, many Christians have bought into this sort of false belief. But is this what the Scripture teaches us? By no means! If you are a Christian, then as we confess it even in our constitution “the Holy Scriptures are the only infallible source and norm for all matters of faith, doctrine and life.” That’s right.

Not only for matters of faith and teaching, but also in matters pertaining to our lives, which we as Christians lead in this world. And do you know who is to blame that this misunderstanding has crept into the Church, among God’s people?

Yes, you are right... one of them stands right here before you. That is us, pastors, when we fail to teach and preach about it more often. Sure, we, pastors, could also blame laypeople saying that, yes, but they don’t want to learn.

They are not interested in what our God has to say about our daily lives. So, perhaps we could kindly agree that we all are partly guilty in this and need to strive to do better, – teaching the whole council of God, and also learning it joyfully.

Now, how would we answer to such misunderstanding that Christianity is only about spiritual things and has nothing, or a little to say about how to lead our daily lives? We could answer, for example, saying:

“Ha, you have no idea what you are talking about! But that’s a great question, and I am happy to explain what we believe.” Our God is not a figment of our imagination. He reveals Himself as the Creator.

As the Creator of everything that exists. He created all things, visible and invisible, all that we know and all that we don’t know. Besides, as we can read it in Genesis, He not only created, He also ordered entire creation. His creation is orderly one.

We often call this order the laws of creation, or we could call it the Creator’s design. But there is more, as we confessed it today in our Creed, – He also made me and all creatures. That’s right He created you, and this is where the really cool stuff comes in. He didn’t just create you for nothing.

Our God has created us for a certain kind of lives, for a certain kind of relationships, and for a certain kind of responsibilities. And, we don’t need to guess and wonder what they are, for He has clearly revealed them to us.

Let’s spend a bit more time in Genesis. Most people get it wrong. They read the first chapters of Genesis and conclude that those are such naïve and simple stories, nothing scientific and sophisticated. They are so wrong.

The very opposite is true. In the first chapters of Genesis our God doesn’t reveal us something that we can know on our own, for that He gives us our reason, and that includes all the so-called scientific knowledge.

What He does reveal to us in Genesis are the answers which we *can not* discover on our own, not by logic, not by scientific enterprise. He gives us answers to the most important questions, – who we are as human beings, and why we are here, for what sort of life we are created. We can’t know these on our own and if we reject our Creator’s revelation – we won’t know them.

Let’s take just a quick look at how Genesis gives us answers to these life-defining questions and how they shape how we see everything through our Christian “glasses”. Who are you? You are created in God’s Image and likeness.

Meaning, God the Creator Himself shaped you in your mother’s womb. God’s Image – it means that you are created to be His own representatives, His own regents, that you will act on behalf of and in the place of your Creator.

Or we could say that you will represent Him and manifest His presence here and now. How? Acting in His likeness, meaning, acting not as it pleases us, but acting like our gracious and generous Creator Himself would act.

That's your core identity. This is what defines who you are. This is what defines your significance. Your worth doesn't depend of what you have accomplished, or what you possess, or how famous you are, it depends on the One who created you and sent you to be His ambassador.

It means that you are infinitely valuable and significant, and nothing and no one can either reduce your significance, nor make it greater. It is as great as it can get. That's your Creator's gift to you.

Now, why are you here? What are we supposed to do as our Creator's representatives? What is our mission? What is our purpose? What will give the deepest meaning to our lives? We can't answer these questions on our own, neither reason nor scientific enterprise are able to answer these.

And we don't have to. For our Creator gives His answers to us in Genesis. We are here to continue His work of creation and ordering the creation and then caring for it. He specifies two main ways how we are to do that.

"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth", this one has to do with our marriages and families, where we literally participate in God's work of creation. We won't spend more time of this now.

But the other one is this. And this is what Paul the apostle was talking about writing to Thessalonians. "Subdue the earth and have dominion over every living thing". Or as it was put in Genesis 2 "work it [this bountiful garden Earth] and keep it". This one has to do with our work.

We could say that God has created us to continue His work of creation and ordering, taking what is there already and making it into something new and useful and beautiful, good for our flourishing both as individuals and as community.

The amazing thing is how the Scripture portray our work. It is not simply us doing work, it is actually God the Creator Himself working through us. This helps us to see also our work through our Christian "glasses" in totally different way from how the world sees it. And this is what Paul was addressing as well.

Today we can see extreme views on work in our society. At the one end there is this very low view on work. It seems that for many and many their work is a kind of misery that you need to suffer in order to get your paycheck. Then you can spend a few days doing nothing ... or having fun... or partying... etc.

The other extreme is the overly high view on work and on our careers, when your work becomes your main identity, your main sources of significance. If you have it, you are somebody, if you lose it, or if you don't get the job you wanted, you are nobody, you are basically done.

Christian "glasses" gives us this beautifully balanced view on work. When we work, when we do something that benefits others, we participate in God's work of caring for His creation. We are then God's coworkers.

Then this is how we think about our work, – it is not so much about what should I do, instead we ask – how can my Father in heaven use me with all that He has given me to serve better those people, whom He has placed in my life? In our jobs we become like masks of God, for it is He Himself who uses us to serve others.

But even that is not all. Yes, we work on behalf of our God when we do our work, but we also work for our God when we serve our neighbors. As Paul writes elsewhere, – when you work, work like you are serving your Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ. For it was Him who brought you into this divine fellowship with the Father and Himself.

It is Jesus who sends His Spirit to dwell in you and to change your heart, so that you gladly listen to what your God teaches you. It is Jesus and the Holy Spirit who shape your Christian "glasses" and enable you to see the world, ourselves and our responsibilities as they are, so that we can live fulfilled lives as who we truly are.

As redeemed, restored and blessed children of God, and disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is why Paul was so categorical speaking about work. "Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us [as we just discussed it].

If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat." You can't claim to be a Christian, but then be lazy and idle. These things just don't go together. Thus, we can see how our Christian "glasses" deeply shape also our work life.

And it was this unique way of seeing ourselves and our work, which to great extent contributed to the creation of the prosperous Western culture. And it's not something your pastor is making up.

It was the conclusion of Max Weber, the father of modern management theory. The same conclusion I recently heard from Islamic leader, who criticized the laziness of his own people.

The same truth was recently stated by Nepalese minister of economics, when he publicly said that if Nepal wants to flourish, they need to embrace this sort of understanding of work, that enabled the rise and flourishing of the West.

This wisdom on how to see our work is entrusted to us. To learn, to live, to share. Our God gives us many gifts. Surely, the forgiveness of all our sins through Jesus and restoration in relationships with the Father is the greatest one.

But He also restores our “glasses” through which we see everything, He helps us to see the beautiful life for which we are created, and He sends us His Spirit to enable us to joyfully take up the responsibilities that He has given us.

You see, Christian faith is by no means just about our inner spirituality. It is about our entire lives. It is also about this very distinct view, this beautiful view on work, where our work is the Father’s gift to us.

Thus, we can join with Paul saying, “as for us, brothers and sisters, let’s not grow weary in doing good”, together with our God and for His glory.

Amen.