

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Being Productive

by Dan Trygg

“The one stealing no longer let him steal. Instead, let him labor working with his own hands what is good, in order that he might have something to share with anyone in need.” Ephesians 4:28

“About brotherly love: you don’t need me to write you because you yourselves are taught by God to love one another. ¹⁰ In fact, you are doing this toward all the brothers and sisters in the entire region... But we encourage you... to do so even more, ¹¹ to seek (aspire) to be quiet, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, ¹² so that you may walk properly (becomingly) toward outsiders and not be dependent on anyone.” 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

“For we hear that there are some among you who walk irresponsibly, not working at all, but are being busybodies. ¹² Now we command and exhort such people, by the Lord Jesus Christ, that working with quietness, they may eat their own bread. ¹³ Brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.” 2 Thessalonians 3:11-13

“The saying is trustworthy, and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, in order that those who have believed God will be mindful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for people... ¹⁴ And let our people also learn to engage in good works for cases of urgent need, so that they will not be unfruitful.” Titus 3:8,14

The seeming goal of American work culture is “retirement”, ...the time in life when we will “no longer have to work”. *The way we talk about “work” often paints it as a necessary evil*, ...something we would be glad to put behind us. We have been taught to long for the day when we “won’t have to go to work” anymore. Of course, when we think that way, it is easy to resent the restrictions of our work life, ...instead of having a positive attitude and outlook regarding what we spend nearly a third of our lives doing. **Many people have bought into this mindset, and have designed their final years to be a “play time”, ...a time when they are “rightfully” living only for themselves.**

Aside from occasional soldiers’ pensions, offered by victorious kings and conquerors for their troops, ...and occasional grants of benevolence for noteworthy service, **the modern idea of “retirement” is virtually absent from most of human history.** It wasn’t until the 1870’s and 1880’s that railroads, and some other businesses began to offer pension programs. In 1889, Germany was the first country to promote a general retirement age of 70, and provide payment to those who would voluntarily leave the workforce, to make room for younger workers to be employed. **In 1935, the United States instituted Social Security to provide retirement benefits for elderly American workers.** At the time, the federal retirement age was determined to be 65, but the average lifespan was only 58 years of age. Apart from such social programs, elderly people were cared for by their families, or other helpful neighbors, ...or they became sick and died. **After World War II, pension benefits plans became more prevalent as a recruitment and retention tool to attract and keep valuable employees.** By the 1950’s, the image of retirement as a time for leisure activities grew in the mind of the public in America. **When these programs were introduced, most workers did not want to retire. They wanted to keep on working.** And, as we have seen in recent years, many of those benefits and pension packages have been modified or cut. More and more older people are going back to some kind of work to supplement their retirement income. **It is important to keep in mind that the vast majority of people who have ever lived on this planet have had no “retirement income” at all. For most people, work is a necessary part of life.**

Even before there was sin, God gave humankind responsibilities. God placed them in the garden to “work it and to preserve it” (Gen. 2:15). The word for “work” also means to “serve”. People were to work and serve the ground, to protect and guard it. **Certainly, this required effort, ...but it was not “toilsome” until after the fall, ...when God said that the ground was cursed as a consequence of their sin, and “in toil (lit., ‘pain’) you shall eat of it all the days of your life. ...By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground...” (Gen. 3:17-19).** **Sin brought pain, ...the pain of childbirth, and the pain of toil, ...and sin brought death. It is important to see that work came before either of these realities. Work was positive. It was meant to be creative and productive.** In serving and caring for the earth, people were to also develop skills to order the creation to bring beauty, nourishment and satisfaction. Before the fall, this was easy. **After sin disrupted the world, thorns and thistles grew up to interfere with productivity, and required sweat and pain to remove and control. For the average person, work was always beset with resistance, disorder or difficulty. Nevertheless, work was necessary for survival and comfort.**

Initially, work was tied to the land. There was a direct relationship between humans and the land they inhabited. They became tillers of the soil, herders of flocks and herds. **As time went on, some began to gather into cities, and devised various skills and products to trade for food from those who farmed and cared for animals.** People worked with their minds and hands to create tools, clothing and other desirable things to trade. **Still others were able to unite and organize people to work together to produce desirable products more efficiently. Eventually, some**

began to dominate others, and took from them. Others stole from those who farmed or made goods to trade. Thievery, robbery, oppression, and injustice spread right along wherever humankind spread.

As we study Ephesians 4, Paul has been instructing new believers to put aside their old selves, their former mindsets, and their previous ways of doing things, and to renew their perception in light of who they are in Christ, and who Christ is in them. **They are to put on their new identities as children of God, and live to honor Him.** Jesus had said that to come after Him, we must choose to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him (Lk. 9:23). His purpose and plan for our lives has to come first and foremost. **We are no longer to live for ourselves, but for Him, who died and rose on our behalf** (2 Cor. 5:14,15). That includes every aspect of our lives, ...even our retirement. **With all that we have and are, we are to offer ourselves to be “at the service” of our King.**

Earlier in the letter, Paul had described an expansive picture of the potential and purpose that our lives can have in Christ. He encourages us to seek to know more about what He has in mind for us, what He has set aside for us, and the power He has made available for us to walk in (Eph. 1:15-23). We are not at all limited to the four walls of our living room, or the patterns of the past. **God wants to do something “God-sized” with us, ...if we will work together with Him.** In this chapter, he directs our attention to our role in the body of Christ. **The Lord has recruited us to invest in the lives of other believers to help them grow, mature and to discover God’s purpose for their lives. We are to grow all aspects of our lives into Christ, so that we can learn how He wants to use us to benefit others.**

We can’t do that, if we keep on living the way we used to live, ...or continue to follow the patterns and plans of our old lives. We can’t do that if we are going to be phony or fake with one another. We won’t be able to be responsive to the Spirit, if we shut down our inner selves. Part of the growth process is being honest with ourselves, and with each other.

Another area to challenge us is our relationship to work. Some of the people in the body of Christ at Ephesus had been slackers, thieves and had chosen to live their lives at the expense of others. **If they were going to follow Christ, they needed to put that selfish pattern of living aside, and learn to live a productive life.** Paul states it simply, “The one stealing, no longer let him steal, rather let him labor, working with his own hands what is good, in order that he might have something to give to the one having a need.” The word for “steal” includes embezzlement, pilfering, skipping out on bills, cheating or any other method where a person would take what does not rightfully belong to him without the permission of the owner. **Jesus is all about changing lives. He wants to turn the person who takes advantage of others into a person who brings advantage and blessing to others.**

Notice that Paul used the word “labor”. This word means something that requires effort, struggle, and difficulty. **It may be boring, repetitive, or even painful.** For someone who has learned to avoid the undesirable aspects of work, by conniving or walking away from responsibility, to actually face up to this area of life is a clear and definite sign of a genuine conversion. **For those who refuse to make such changes, the limitation of their heart is keeping them from following Christ, and developing a productive and beneficial walk in the Spirit.**

There are several unhealthy ways to relate to work. There are those who are just living unto themselves. They are faithfully showing up at their jobs, and doing what is required, but their vision and heart is focused only on themselves. They may not be caught up in work in an unhealthy way, but **they have no interest in helping others. Then there are those who avoid work,** as we mentioned above. **There are also those who live for work, ...those who overwork. They have chosen to live for their job, rather than for Christ.** If they claim to know Christ, they are only giving Him the leftover scraps of their time or energy. They are investing in the temporal world of business and “things”, and have sold their lives to their jobs. **Then there are those called “busybodies”.** They are people who are trying to get involved in the lives of others, and avoiding their own responsibilities. **The Greek word is that they are “workers around”, that is, they are busy in the affairs or concerns of others.** They are often agitated, pushy, insistent and opinionated. They meddle in the lives of others, or they are trying to peddle their ideas and opinions on others. Instead of being productive and helpful, they become invasive and pushy. **They need to learn to be quiet inside, and to mind their own business.** They usually have issues and habits that keep them operating on the surface level of life, rather than learning to go deeper with God. **Inner quietness, developing an awareness of God in your own life, and attending to your own responsibilities, provide a healthy foundation from which to help others appropriately.** These are like the man Jesus described, who saw a speck in the eye of someone else, but somehow was oblivious to the log in his own eye (Matt. 7:3-5). Jesus’ counsel was to first remove the log, then he would see clearly to help his friend.

We have been created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph. 2:10). **God prepares them and brings them into our lives.** We need to keep ourselves “at the ready” to serve, when He brings such opportunities. **Our example as good workers on the job, and as helpful people off the job, will reveal Jesus.** We may retire from our secular jobs, but **we never retire from the opportunity to serve Christ by serving others.** Put off the old, put on the new, and grow to become responsible, helpful and productive people who make temporal investments that will count for eternity.