

## **God is Still Speaking Through Labor**

I Thessalonians 5:12-22

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God speaks through the way we labor. No matter what our labor is. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote "If a [person] is called to be a street sweeper, [they] should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. [They] should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say; here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well." (in the sermon *Three Dimensions of a Completed Life*).

There is no separation between church and work, between faith and labor. That doesn't mean you need to talk about your faith as you work; it means you need to **live** your faith as you work; it means that you don't approach your daily routine as a functional atheist, forgetting that God is with you to help you and that God needs to work through you to love others *through your work*.

God is also speaking through those who work around us, whose labor benefits us. Paul is talking about that in the passage we read. Actually, he is referring to those who are preachers/teachers/leaders in the church. But I think what he says can be expanded to both what we do in our work and how we react to those who work around us, whose labor benefits us.

Listen again.

Respect those who labor among you. What does that look like in your daily routine? Whom do you encounter often who you may forget to treat with respect? Remember the street sweeper.

Admonish the idlers. That doesn't mean cursing someone out if they don't do their job right. It does mean that we need to hold one another accountable, because sometimes not doing a job right could have serious consequences for people. Think airbags that don't inflate!

Encourage the fainthearted. I think of those who are harassed or abused at work and are afraid to challenge those who harass and abuse

for fear of losing their job. How can we help and support them, both individually and systemically?

Help the weak. We all have days when we are weary or ill in body mind or spirit. So do other people, and sometimes we need to cut them a break. Then there are those all around us in downtown Hartford who are mentally ill or addicted, homeless and struggling, those who are weak in political and social power. How can we help, both individually and systemically?

Be patient with all of them. Well. The DMV. School students. That person at work who doesn't return our calls or respond to emails. A colleague of mine calls those folk the "more grace required" people. "MGR" Who is MGR in your life? Your grace is required.

Don't repay evil for evil. Right? Don't escalate a conflict. Find other ways to solve problems. Get help. Get creative. It's hard. Remember God.

Rejoice always. Is he kidding? No, he's not talking about putting on a happy face. He's encouraging us to remember to access the deep joy of knowing how much God loves you and how God has given you gifts to be used for good in the world in whatever you do. To do that when work is easy and when it is hard. Rejoice always.

Pray without ceasing. Not necessarily out loud. Have an ongoing conversation with God through the day, the way you would text a friend or family member about what's going on in your life. Imagine texting God. It helps. It really does.

Give thanks in all circumstances. When something goes wrong, or you fail at a task, ask "what did I learn?" and give thanks for new insights and resilience to try again. And don't forget to give thanks when things go right!

Don't quench the Spirit. I think this is one of the most important ways we can live into our call to be God's ambassador in this world. I think of all the children out there whose spirits get quenched when people tell them "you can't" more often than "you can." When assumptions are made about them based on their race or social class or immigration status. When someone has a passion and everyone throws roadblocks in their way. When people don't believe in each other. I saw this just the other day. My

son, Ben, is studying to be a classical singer. I shared that with someone, and instead of rejoicing in his passion for music, their first response was "what's his Plan B?" That's quenching the Spirit.

Remember the words of the prophets, the teachings of Jesus. Let your work be guided by them. Read the Bible from time to time. Come to church to remember what this is all about.

Hold tight to good and turn away from evil, temptation, the seduction of the world's definition of success or value. Both in evaluating your own work, and in your interactions with others working with or for or around you. When I think of this, I often pray for first responders and ICE agents.

Work is not a punishment. Work is how we build community and care for one another. Work is where God moves among us just as surely as God moves among us here. Work is where God speaks to us and through us to others. We work with the hands, the feet, the voice, the eyes, the ears, the heart, the energy, the love of God whatever we do. When we remember that this is the case, it makes all the difference. When we forget, it makes an impact, too.

The writer Mary Gordon wrote this lovely piece in her book *God is Love*. Here is her prayer for all who labor.

"I pray for those who paint the underside of boats; for makers of ornamental drains on roofs too high to be seen; for cobblers who labor over inner soles; for seamstresses who stitch the wrong side of linings; for dentists who polish each gold surface of the fillings of upper molars; for sewer engineers and those who repair water mains; for electricians; for artists who suppress what threatens to do injustice to their visions; for surgeons whose sutures are a thing of beauty; for those whose work is for your eye only, who labor for your entertainment, or their own, who sleep in peace, knowing that their effects are unknown. Protect them from downheartedness....Grant them perseverance, for the sake of your love, which is humble, invisible, and heedless of reward. Amen."