Flipped: God and Work
1 Thessalonians 4:9-12
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When I was 19 I got my first job (now it wasn't the first time I was paid for work, but it was the first time I worked consistently for several months in a row). And I found myself, through the beautiful gift of nepotism (in other words my dad got me the job), working at the Husky Oil Refinery here in town as a Tank Farm Operator.

Now a Refinery job as a 19-year-old student was incredible. The pay was amazing – in fact to this day it was the most I've ever made. And this enabled me to cover my expenses at Trinity Western University – which is not a cheap place. On top of this Tank Farm Operators spend a lot of time sitting around waiting to push the red button – kind of like Homer Simpson. And so I was able to read all my textbooks over the summer before the semester even started. It was an awesome job.

But the management at Husky made it very clear to me that the reason I had this job was because I was going to school. So quitting school to keep making the big bucks wasn't an option.

And I bought this line and so viewed Husky as a steppingstone job. Have you ever had one of those? I knew I was only going to be there a short while and it was only a tool for helping me get my eventual "real job." And it was with this perspective that one day I very innocently shot my mouth off while talking to one of the permanent employees.

I said "I can't imagine how anyone could survive here at Husky – there's hardly any mental stimulation. It's just wait and then push the red button."
…
It's hard to imagine anyone being stupid enough to say something like that, but I did. And it didn't go over super well with the guy whose real job was working at Husky. And I spent the next hour or so listening very apologetically to a lecture on how important a job I had and how ungrateful I was. And it turns out these were the words of Jesus.

Let's do a little discussion. Turn back to the group of people you were facing when you came in and answer the three questions on the screen. You've got 3 minutes. Go!

1.) What is your name?
2.) Have you ever viewed a job you worked as a steppingstone? What was it about the job that made you feel this way?
3.) What's the difference between someone who "lives to work" and someone who "works to live?" Do you have a tendency towards one of these positions?

Go ahead and grab your Bible. We are in 1st Thessalonians 4 today. And in this letter Paul addresses a young church stuck in an upside-down world, and shows them and us how Jesus wants to flip us over so we can live to His glory and our good.
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Would you stand with me as we read 1 Thessalonians 4 starting in verse 9. Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Now last week we started the second half of this letter where Paul starts getting practical. And so in verses 1-3 he says 'Here's how to live in a way that pleases God. This is God's will for you; be sanctified. Look more and more like Jesus. This is the worship God wants from you, and this is where the good life He wants for you resides.

And then he gives 3 examples of how Jesus followers please God. We please Him with our sexuality, our work and the way we approach death.

Now last week was sex Sunday. So if you missed that you might want to grab it online – just wear earphones so nobody hears you. But today is work Sunday which is just as important though not quite as tantalizing. Like nobody sneaks off to watch someone do work online when nobody's watching. That temptation just doesn't exist.

But here's the reality: the way the world views work is upside-down and broken. And as a result people both outside and inside the church have been trapped by work and are not living the abundant life Jesus wants for us.
…
So in the world there are essentially three kinds of people. Some people are "work to live" people – they work hard all week in order to be able to live hard all weekend. For them work is this pesky thing they have to do in order to do the things they really want to do. They just work to live.

But other people are "live to work people." These people don't do anything on the weekend because there is no weekend. They are always at work because their work is their source of meaning. They live to work.

And then there are some people who prefer not to work at all. And Paul's got stuff to say to all three of these kinds of people.

Incidentally, one kind of person Paul doesn't talk about in this section is someone who wants to work but can't for whatever reason. We're not talking about that today.

But what the Bible says to these three kinds of people – live to work, work to live, don't want to work at all people – is revolutionary. The message is that all good work is an opportunity to partner with what God is doing in the world.
…
Now admittedly this isn't nearly as exciting as saying "sex done right makes you look like Jesus." But that was last week. That said, as I was studying I became convinced this is really just as radical a thought: All good work is an opportunity to partner with what God is doing in the world.
…
So first Paul takes care of those who don't want to work. We get this in verse 11 where he says: "make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, mind your own business and work with your hands."

Now I don't know about you, but this sounds a little naggy to me. Like I remember being a 10-year-old and visiting my grandparents. And I was acting my age. I was running around the house, cutting random stuff with scissors and using the couch cushions to build forts. And I can hear grandma's voice. And she didn't say these exact words "make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and mind your own business. But I remember thinking "she sounds like she's both happy I'm here and looking forward to when I'm going to leave."

But Paul's not a naggy grandma. Here's the context. There are people in Thessalonica who aren't working and are getting into trouble. In chapter 5 he adds:

> We urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

So they are just sitting around. It's like COVID happened and they got laid off, but then work opened back up and they were like "You know, I think I'll keep collecting CERB for a bit." And Paul's like this is not the goal. Don't be a drain on the system.

Of course there was no COVID in the first century. The problem was actually a Greek philosophy that believed work was degrading. So if you were a laborer you were a lowlife. Now some work was less degrading like intellectual work. But the best work was no work at all. And so people aspired to this – they retired early – and ended up being disruptive busybodies in the church.

And so if you've got a tendency towards not working then the call is get a job if you are at all able. It's good to work. Verse 12 says do this so people outside the church will respect you, and so that you won't be dependant on anyone in the church.
…

Now the reality is that in a group like this most of us don't fit that demographic. Most people at Lighthouse/Fort George are either working incredibly hard as students and coffee hocking baristas at the same time. Or you worked incredibly hard until your body gave out and you couldn't work anymore. And there are a few of us in the middle still working hard and still waiting for our bodies to give out.

And Paul isn't scolding people like us saying "work harder and put my cushions back on the couch." But he does have a message for people who work to live and those who live to work. And his message is neither of these positions are godly. Instead all good work is an opportunity to partner with what God is doing in the world.
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Now this is a practical section in 1st Thessalonians, so I want to use the text to answer a few practical questions about work. Questions like: Does God have a specific job for me? And, What kind of work is good work? And, Should I pursue work I like? And, since I want to please God are there some jobs that God likes more than others? These are questions Jesus followers have always had. And Paul speaks to them here.

So first how do I know what kind of work is best for me?
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Throughout this series we've touched the topic of God's will a few times. And last week it was really clear. Paul says:

> It is God's will that you should be sanctified (1 Thessalonians 4:3)

So it's not God's will that you get into a specific school so you can get some specific training so you can work a specific job in a specific city. God isn't up in heaven saying "Oh Dan. I wonder if you can figure this out. I want you to go to Prairie Bible College – I'll spell it in the clouds. Because if you go there you will meet a certain prof. And she will inspire you and introduce you to an individual from Zimbabwe. And you will head there as a missionary."

But then "Oh no! Not Trinity! That place costs way too much. Oh! Not pastoral ministry – so close and yet so far away. Not Prince George. That place smells like wet dog. Well I guess it's a life of second best for you Dan."
…
That's not how God's will works. God's will is that you be sanctified. That means that you grow to look more and more like Jesus. That's what the text says. That's what He wants from you – that's what brings Him glory. And that's how you get the abundant life that He has for you both today and forever.
…
So look like Jesus. That's God's will for you. And the reality is this can be done in virtually every work environment we ever find ourselves in.

So you can shine Jesus' light into the construction zone. You can shine His light into the realm of education or the world of medicine. And you can shine His light into the church.

This means you don't have to worry about getting God's will wrong as far as what job you are pursuing as long as it is a good job. But what's a good job?
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Well, if you are working as a loan shark who makes your living taking advantage of poor people you should probably get some different employment – that's not a good job.

Or I once heard about a gang member who became a Christian, and then attempted to give himself to becoming the best hitman he could possibly be for Jesus – that doesn't work. The reality is there are bad jobs out there that don't glorify God. So don't get a bad job.

Well, what's a good job? A good job as defined by the text is a job that helps people and works towards the common good.
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So notice how in verses 9 and 10 Paul is talking about love. He says "Hey, we don't have to talk much about how to love each other because you've been taught how to do this and you're doing it. Way to go."

But then halfway through verse 10 the NIV puts in a period. And it feels a bit like Paul is changing the subject to do some nagging – cushions on the couch! (I'm really stuck on that today). But that's not it. In the Greek verses 9 to 12 are all one sentence. And that means Paul isn't saying two things here – he isn't saying love each other and work. He is saying one thing – love each other by working.

So verse 10 then says "We urge you, brothers and sisters, to do this more and more – in other words love each other more and more – by verse 11 and 12, by working. But notice also what Paul doesn't say. He doesn't say just work for money – or work to live. Instead he says work to love. Work because you want to invest in the lives of the people around you, and you don't want to be a drain on the system. Work for the common good.
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Now there are a couple ways to do this. You can get a job that makes a lot of money and you can use your money to help people. Or you can get a job that helps people and maybe you make a lot of money and maybe you don't. But either way, good work is work that helps people. But beyond this there is no restriction.

So you can do this in construction or road maintenance or medicine or pulp and paper or law or real estate; all these jobs work for the greater good. And so the call here is don't work to live, work to love. Work to benefit the people around you.

And when we work to love we are doing what God does. So God causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. He is constantly bringing good into all of our lives because He loves us. And so we join Him in doing what He is doing when we work to make this place better.

…

Next question: Should I pursue work I love? Like should I work at Starbucks if I hate coffee? Or what if you are an electrician but you think you would be a lot happier selling houses?

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Paul addresses questions like these with the words "quiet life" in verse 11. Now this is a little tricky but many commentators think Paul isn't saying "sit down and be quiet" instead he's saying seek a life – and here a work life – that leads to inner quiet – shalom. The wisdom is: if you can, then by all means pursue work you love.

…

So God's will is that we be sanctified – that we look more and more like Jesus and we do this in every context we find ourselves in. All good work can accomplish this. So since that's true make it your ambition to get a job that you are wired for if at all possible. Find work that stirs your passions. After all it is much easier to work because you love when you love the work.

…

But what about the other side of the coin? Come back with me to my 19-year-old self at Husky thinking "All I'm doing here is making gasoline. I'm not helping people right now. But one day I'll be a pastor, and then I'll be doing something that makes a difference. And then I'll live to work – my work will be really important, and I'll be important because I've got an important job."

…

One of the upside-down aspects of our culture is workaholism. People give themselves to climbing the ladder as high as they can or getting the most respectable job they can and working their heart out at it. And in our culture people like this are often respected and even idolized.

People like this live to work. And they do this because they are looking to their work for their meaning and value in life. I'm valuable because I'm a CEO and make a lot of money.

But our meaning isn't supposed to come from what we do or how rich we are. Those are idols that will always disappoint. Our meaning is supposed to come from God has made us to be. We bear God's image. And yes, He is a working God, but He is also a God who rests. And let me tell you it makes no sense to outwork your God. So if you are getting burnt out, and your family is suffering because you are overworking, you aren't actually working for Jesus. Jesus never burns out His employees.

…

Now here's a weird irony. One of the places people live to work most is in ministry. Now we don't generally do this for the money. But ministry workers often burn out because we think we are doing important stuff for God. And we want people's respect (I just want to be known as a spiritual person). And we hope Jesus will respect our work. Now that should sound broken because it is. But it's really easy to fall into.

And it happens when we believe the lie that some work is sacred, and the rest is secular. Some work matters to God, and the rest is just necessary so people don't starve to death. So some people are pastors, missionaries or non-profit workers and everyone else just exists.

That's baloney. That's not the picture the New Testament gives us. Instead Peter tells everyone in his church

> You are living stones that God is building into His spiritual temple. What's more, you are His holy priests… you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God.(1 Peter 5:2)

So get this, what Peter says is every Jesus follower is a priest. A priest is someone who points people to God and helps them on their journey. And guess what – that's your calling. So you've got the same calling I do. God's will for all of us is that we be sanctified. That we shine His light into the place He has put us. And every good job enables a person to do this. There is no sacred or secular work. And that's because the God we serve is a God who works in the physical – or so called secular – world.

So Jesus made coffee tables – He was a carpenter. And this wasn't a backsliding time for Him when He was just working to live. No! Our God has always been this kind of God. In creation He got His hands dirty making people out of mud. In the incarnation He came down to become one of us. And in the resurrection He didn't throw off His physical body to become something spiritual; He made His physical body new.

And so there is no divide between the secular and the sacred. Work isn't sacred at all – people are sacred. People image God. And we image Him when we work for the common good because we love. And we image Him when we don't overwork because we trust that ultimately it is Him who is working.

…

So friends here's the call: don't just work for money. And don't work for meaning. And certainly don't not work at all. Instead work for Jesus at the best job you can get and in every job you get. Or to paraphrase Paul elsewhere. Whether you flip burgers, make art, build houses, rescue people from burning buildings or do missions, do it all for the glory of God. Work because you want to please God with your life.

Brothers and sisters, this is God's will for you. And here's the good news: when we live the life He designed us to live we find ourselves living right side up in an upside-down world. And this is where the abundant life He designed us for is found.