

# Lord of Our Labor



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Gen. 1:27, 28; 2:15; 3:17-19; Matt. 25:14-30; Acts 10:36-43; Eph. 4:28; 2 Thess. 3:6-12.*

**Memory Text:** “He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise” (*Luke 3:11, NKJV*).

**Key Thought:** Those who live under the lordship of Christ will demonstrate excellence and productivity in their labor. The work of their minds and hands will bring honor to God and blessings to those around them.

**T**he dignity of labor. We are called, as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, to set our minds on things above, not on things on the earth. However, at the same time, God also calls us to be productive in our daily labor. Commenting on Christ's parable of the talents, Ellen White notes that “God has called us to serve Him in the temporal affairs of life. Diligence in this work is as much a part of true religion as is devotion. . . . Every man and woman who is truly converted will be a diligent worker.”—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 343.

In this week's lesson, we will explore the gift of work for those who have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We will discover that excellence and productivity in our work are important parts of our witness as citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 3.*

## The Gift of Labor in Eden *(Gen. 1:27, 28; 2:15).*

Contrary to a common notion, daily labor is not one of the negative consequences of living in a sinful world (the common *notion* that labor itself is bad, though, *is* a consequence of sin). Meaningful labor for the human family was part of God’s original and perfect plan.

**What** work assignment did the Creator give to our first parents? *Gen. 1:27, 28; 2:15.* What was the nature of their work? Why should there be work in a sinless, perfect environment? What does the existence of work in such a context tell us about the idea of work in general?

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The Garden of Eden was a flawless environment. All creation rejoiced together in perfect harmony. In this idyllic setting, God gave Adam and Eve a meaningful work assignment, both for the Garden itself and for the world in general. Their whole relationship with the created world around them wasn’t limited to just enjoying it; they were, rather, to interact with it. In fact, they were to rule over the created world; thus, in a sense, they were gardeners-rulers, working in their garden home while ruling over the earth and the things in it. Created out of that world, they were distinctly part of it, working in it as laborers while at the same time given rule over it, an interesting combination of roles, to be sure.

**Given** the nature of humanity and our capacity to grow, to learn, to be changed, why do you think God wanted our original parents, even in a sinless environment, to work and to have responsibilities?

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In what ways does your labor, whatever kind it is, offer you opportunities to grow, to mature, to learn? What could you do in order to take advantage of whatever opportunities your work does offer you toward growth and maturity?

**Key Texts:** *Genesis 1:28, 2:15*

### Teachers Aims:

1. To show that God instituted labor before the Fall.
2. To explore the benefits of labor.
3. To show how our labor can bless others.

### Lesson Outline:

#### I. Labor in the Garden (*Gen. 2:15*).

- A. Why was labor an important part of God's original plan?
- B. How were Adam and Eve originally meant to have dominion, or rule, over God's creation?

#### II. Labor After the Fall (*Gen. 3:17, Prov. 14:23*).

- A. How did the Fall affect the concept of labor and labor itself?
- B. Why is labor still important?
- C. How is honest labor a way of glorifying God?

#### III. Working to Bless Others (*Eph. 4:28*).

- A. Discuss how refusing to work or how not working wisely can be a drain on society.
- B. How can the fruit of our labor be a blessing to others?

**Summary:** The Lord instituted work for our benefit and a blessing to others. Productive labor should be a part of our daily Christian living. Whether working at home, on our jobs, in the community, or for the church, we should work to the best of our ability. This honors God, who is the Lord of our labor.

## COMMENTARY

### Lord of Our Labor.

Learning to labor is one of the first tasks a person must learn. A baby must learn to suck in order to feed successfully. Fortunately, God created us with the desire to work. Most persons have some activities they enjoy doing—an activity that brings satisfaction to the soul. When a person's labor is in harmony with the way God created that person, then that person finds working enjoyable.

Unfortunately, in our fallen state, few persons know themselves well enough to really understand what God created them for. When we do not know ourselves well enough to discriminately select what is good for us, we are more likely to take hold of what is near. Or, if someone were reared to believe the mistaken idea that "good" work means subservient obedience to an external authority figure, that person may never have studied his or her responses to stimuli in order to nurture them.

## The Challenges of Labor After the Fall

(Gen. 3:17-19).

The entrance of sin into our world resulted in numerous negative consequences. The most devastating consequence was death. Long before Adam and Eve experienced death personally, they would witness the horrifying consequence of their sin in the death of Abel at the hands of his brother Cain. Sin not only affected the human family; it also affected the environment.

**Read** prayerfully and carefully Genesis 3:17-19. How did the entrance of sin affect the environment and our interaction with it? How do you understand what God is saying in these texts? Were these changes purely a punishment of sin, or were they the natural results of sin?

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It is not clear how much time elapsed after God created the world before sin marred the perfect creation. Undoubtedly, Adam and Eve enjoyed the privilege of laboring in that wonderful setting. With the entrance of sin, however, the environment became harsh and hostile. Our first parents were now compelled to labor by the sweat of their brow. The cycle of deterioration and death in the natural environment would be a constant reminder of their own mortality as well as a stark contrast to the Eden they had once enjoyed.

**A quick reading** of those texts sounds as if the Lord was being very harsh in punishing them. Yet, if you read below the surface, what else can you see here? In other words, in what ways could the Lord have used these changes to help Adam and Eve?

“It was God’s purpose to alleviate by toil the evil brought into the world by man’s disobedience. By toil the temptations of Satan might be made ineffectual, and the tide of evil stayed. And though attended with anxiety, weariness, and pain, labor is still a source of happiness and development, and a safeguard against temptation. Its discipline places a check on self-indulgence, and promotes industry, purity, and firmness. Thus it becomes a part of God’s great plan for our recovery from the fall.”—Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People*, p. 213.

**What examples have you seen, if any, of how work can be used for our spiritual benefit?**

Individuals must develop their own identity to know what work fits them best. With the lack of a secure identity in Christ, many persons settle for jobs that do not completely mesh with the gears that drive them. Whenever they put in the clutch to change their speed or direction, they feel the gears grind and tear at their soul. In such situations work is toil, rather than a means of creative satisfaction. It may provide money to put food on the table and a roof over one's head, but it is destructive to the lives that live under that roof and eat that food. Work in such a situation is closer to a curse than the blessing God originally designed it to be.

Fortunately, there is good news for those who labor under the curse rather than under Christ. We find good news in the response of Christ to both the religious leaders who accused a woman of inappropriate labor and to the woman herself. This woman, who, in her culture, was supposed to work for her husband and find satisfaction in his lordship, was caught adulterously meeting her needs elsewhere. Christ saw she had not been created as a wanton woman but that her needs had been deprived and she had developed a habit of looking elsewhere to find satisfaction. Rather than accuse her, He considered her motives and understood the ache in her heart.

Jesus also saw the harshness of the religious leaders who had trapped her and who now blamed her for hungrily seeking satisfaction, all the while failing to address the structures that had deprived her. Jesus understood that when one lives in a desert, it is difficult not to desire water. So He evened the scoreboard. With the words "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (*John 8:7, NASB*), He took away their pulpit by giving them a taste of their own sinfulness.

Jesus' words changed the direction of this woman's work. Through His words, He gave the men a chance to create a confessing community—a community where no one was any better than an adulterer. Thus, He leveled the playing field of their world and strengthened the woman's capacity to transcend her deprivation. Jesus' command to stop sinning was now something she would be able to do (*vs. 11*).

So it is with us. When we attack ourselves for our sins the way the religious leaders attacked the adulterous woman, we leave ourselves deprived and more vulnerable to the very impulses that caused us to sin in the first place. Stoning ourselves for our bad behavior will not help us stop that behavior or do good deeds.

Frequently, a person whose behavior is problematic is also a person with a perfectionist conscience. We find the answer to the destructiveness of perfectionism when we finally understand why we make certain bad choices. Understanding why we choose wrongly frees us to claim the strength our compassionate Lord wants to give us, so we can love ourselves the way He loves us. Such a love equips us to make choices in line with God's will for our life.

## **Productivity in Our Labor** *(2 Thess. 3:6-12).*

**Read** 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 and then answer the following questions:

**1** Whom should the people avoid? \_\_\_\_\_

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**2** Whose example should they follow, and in what? \_\_\_\_\_

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**3** What reason did Paul give for the fact that he and his fellow evangelists worked to earn their bread? \_\_\_\_\_

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**4** What was Paul's attitude toward those who refused to work?

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**5** How would you sum up the essence of what Paul is writing here? What principles are here that we, today, should apply to our own lives and how we relate to work and to those who don't work?

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**6** In what kind of situations might those who are not working be excused for not working? What, then, is your responsibility toward such a person? \_\_\_\_\_

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When we are productive in our labor, we are blessed in many ways. We are able to provide for the needs of our families and loved ones. Our productivity also brings honor to the Lord we serve. Whether we are ploughing a field, caring for the sick, working in the home, or operating a small business, we can use this time of labor for the honor of our Lord and the blessing of those around us. Such is the attitude of an individual who is living under the lordship of Christ.

**“If any would not work, neither should he eat.” How do you relate to this admonition with the whole idea of grace, of forgiveness, of treating people better than they deserve, just as Christ has treated us better than we deserve?**

If the slot we are filling in our social structure is problematic for either ourselves or others, Christ offers us the power to “go and sin no more.” For some, *sinning no more* could mean removing themselves from their current work environment. For others, it will mean being a new creature in the same setting.

God created each of us to reflect His image in a multitude of ways and circumstances. When Christ is Lord of our labor, our labor becomes an opportunity to demonstrate outwardly God’s inward work in us. We are both the clay in our heavenly Potter’s hands and the dough worked by the Holy Spirit’s leaven.

## Inductive Bible Study

**Texts for Discovery:** *Genesis 1:27, 28; 2:15; Matthew 20:1-16; 25:14-30; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12*

- 1 In addition to our jobs, we often have hobbies we pursue as a form of recreation. Our hobbies reveal God’s ideal for labor. Whether it is gardening, woodworking, music, art, sewing, mechanics, or cooking, we receive satisfaction from doing something useful. Why did God’s plan for us involve physical and intellectual exertion? What does this say about being created in God’s image? What hobby do you enjoy, and why?
- 2 How we perform our jobs reveals the extent to which Jesus is Lord of our lives. What does our job performance say about us? About our faith? If you could visit the carpenter’s shop in Nazareth, what would you see to indicate the quality of the products manufactured there?
- 3 Read Matthew 20:1-16. Who got the most out of the deal? The ones who got paid a full day’s wage for working one hour? Or the ones who got to work with the Master for the entire day? Explain your answer.
- 4 Read Matthew 25:14-30. Was the servant who hid his master’s money lazy, fearful, or both? What would have happened to the servants who doubled their master’s money if instead they had made bad investments? Would their master still have praised them? In other words, does God honor risk taking, results, or both? Explain your answer and give examples.
- 5 How is your life *on the job* affected by your life of personal Bible study and prayer? What Bible promises do you claim in order to be a better worker? Share an experience when your good work inspired a compliment from your boss or a fellow worker.

## Laboring for the Benefit of Others

**What** principle regarding labor did the apostle Paul share with the believers in Ephesus? *Eph. 4:28.*

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The apostle Paul practiced what he preached. Speaking to the Ephesian elders before leaving Miletus, he said, “ ‘I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and *for those who were with me*’ ” (*Acts 20:33, 34, NKJV, emphasis supplied*). Paul’s teaching in words and life reminds us of the counsel of another servant of our Lord Jesus Christ. John the Baptist challenged his hearers to let the fruits of their labors bless the lives of those around them: “ ‘He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise’ ” (*Luke 3:11, NKJV*).

**Read** James 2:14-20. What important message does he have for those who profess to be saved by faith alone? How does this counsel help us understand what saving faith is?

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What’s fascinating about James’s words is the kind of works he links with faith. We often tend to think of works as not stealing, not killing, not breaking the Sabbath, and so forth, which, of course, are all part of what it means to follow Christ. Yet, James here talks about something else, that of taking care of those around us who are in need. Just saying nice things to them or just offering a prayer for them isn’t enough. James is giving us an example of the kind of works that reveal true faith. As Christians, we need to be careful that we don’t, as did the Pharisees, get caught up in “ ‘tithing of mint and anise’ ” while ignoring the weightier matters of the law, “ ‘judgment, mercy, and faith’ ” (*Matt. 23:23*).

**Helping the poor requires two things: time and money. How much of your time, how much of your money, are you willing to spend helping those in need around you? What does your answer say about the kind of faith you have?**



## Witnessing

The majority of people spend the better part of their life engaged in some form of labor. If this is where most of our time is spent, and where we come into contact with people outside our family and church circles, it is also our greatest witnessing opportunity.

This week's study asks an important question: "If all people knew about your faith was from how you went about your work, what impressions would they likely receive about your faith?"

Would they see someone who cares for others or someone concerned only with his or her own advancement?

Would they see an honest and trustworthy person committed to upholding the values of his or her God, or would they see someone willing to cut corners?

Would they see someone who went about his or her daily business with integrity and diligence or someone who was just as engaged in office politics and backstabbing as anyone else?

Would they see someone committed to offering solutions or someone who spent his or her time around the watercooler discussing all the problems?

Would they see someone willing and able to work with anyone—even the coarsest people—or would they see just another member of a particular clique?

Would they see someone easily discouraged or someone with an inner Source of strength?

Too often we allow ourselves to be affected by our environment instead of being the salt and light God calls us to be. God places His children in certain situations for a reason; let us not lose sight of our greater mission!

## Laboring as We Await Our Lord's Return *(Matt. 25:14-30).*

The Lord Jesus Christ told a parable that emphasized the importance of using every resource to its full potential while we await His return.

**Read** the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30. What lessons can we learn for our lives today? What message is Jesus giving to us?

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“There is not one human being to whom is not committed some talent, not one but has a work to do for the Lord. Not one is to be excused. Not one is to remain in idleness; but every man is required to do his best; the talents entrusted to him are to be used in consecrated service for the Master.”—Ellen G. White, “Redeem the Time Because the Days Are Evil,” *Review and Herald*, April 21, 1896.

What’s fascinating, too, about this parable is that it comes right after the parable of the foolish virgins (*see Matt. 25:1-13*), which has an emphasis more on the life of faith, devotion, and prayer, which leads to the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Right after comes the parable of the talents, which deals with the active Christian life, not of just praying and believing and studying but of outward work for the Master.

The principle here, though, doesn’t have to be limited only to our work for the Lord. In all our work, all our labor, we should seek to go about our tasks with faithfulness and diligence as did the faithful servants.

**How** do we understand this parable in light of the concept of salvation by faith alone? (*Rom. 3:28, 4:1-13, Gal. 2:16*).

Our faith will be revealed in our works, in what we do with the gifts God has given us. We cannot separate our Christianity from how we live; and how we live cannot be separated from how we work, how we do our job, whatever it is. In the workplace, faithful, thorough, diligent, and honest labor can be a powerful expression of our faith, as well as a powerful witness to the God we serve.

**If all someone knew about your faith was from how you went about your work, what impressions would they likely receive about your faith?**

## Life-Application Approach

**Icebreaker:** In the beginning, the Godhead created a beautiful garden for humankind. It was a wonderful paradise. Where in your life do you find perfect beauty? When do times of complete fulfillment happen on a sinful earth? Discuss how our occupations, ministry to others, and family time can provide *gardens of time* where God meets us. How does “tak[ing] care” (*Gen. 2:15, NIV*) of people and places bless our lives?

### Thought Questions:

❶ Paul admonishes the Ephesian church members to “steal no longer” and to “work” (*Eph. 4:28, NIV*). Why is it important to apply our hands to useful labor? What should be our relationship to those in our midst who don’t work to support their families? Paul says the goal is to *have something to share with those in need*. How might this principle impact how you disburse your income?

❷ Review Matthew 25:14-30. It contains a parable of those who labor productively for God versus one who does not. Take a few moments to rewrite this parable using your own words, reflecting the culture in which you live. Which servant are you? What *talents* has God given you? How will you balance the Master’s call to service with the necessity of earning a living for your family? How might work and ministry be integrated to God’s glory?

### Application Question:

*Doing* in our society seems to imply a frantic pace filled with activity and accomplishments. Compare this to Jesus’ life. Acts 10:36-43 records how Jesus “ ‘went around doing good and healing . . . because God was with Him’ ” (*vs. 38, NIV*). How do we live a reflection of Jesus’ mission of mercy on this earth? Covenant with God to labor for Him, asking for His power and direction. On your calendar, make an “appointment” next week to do something good for someone else.

**Further Study:** See also *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 359, 360.

Some individuals are called to full-time service for God. They have the privilege and responsibility of devoting their complete attention to kingdom business. Ellen White spoke of this call to full-time ministry in a letter written at the beginning of the last century: “Many young men and women now engaged in secular labor will feel earnestly stirred to give themselves to the service of God, to become channels of light. . . . Let these be given an opportunity to obtain an education for the work of God. And let all God’s workers help and cheer and encourage one another with their prayers and faithful conversation, impressing one another with the dignity and responsibility of the work in which they are engaged.”—Letter 66, 1901, *Manuscript Releases*, p. 44.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 How does the Sabbath fit in with this whole question of labor? What message does the Sabbath tell us regarding our labor?
- 2 How do you understand the basic message of this week’s study with the words in Galatians 6:2?
- 3 In every generation, God raises up women and men who honor Him in their labor. Think about your own culture. Who comes to mind as an individual whose labor has brought glory to God and blessing to others?
- 4 Is there anyone in your own church family out of work right now? If so, what can you do as a church community to help (1) provide for his or her family’s immediate needs and (2) find the person work?
- 5 “But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (1 Tim. 5:8). As a class, discuss the implications of this text in regard to how you would treat someone who refuses to provide for his own family.