

Labor

In the U.S. the last holiday of summer is Labor Day. Ironically, it is celebrated by not working, which reflects also its origin by labor unions who coerce businesses to cough up maximum pay for minimum labor. Scripture says much about labor. Little is welcome by labor unions except, perhaps, “the laborer is worthy of his hire” (Luke 10:7) or its condemnation of greedy employers, especially those who gain wealth by defrauding their employees (James 5:4).

At first glance, Scripture seems to take a rather dim view of labor. Labor is the biblical word that emphasizes the arduous, backbreaking, endless toil of work. Labor belongs to the curse: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return unto the ground” (Gen. 3:19). The word occurs most frequently in Ecclesiastes, where the wise man complains how he hates his labor; it causes his heart to despair; and it is vanity and vexation of spirit (Eccl. 2:11, 18, 20). Why? Everything under the sun is full of labor (Eccl. 1:8); there is no end to it (Eccl. 4:8); we labor for the mouth but the appetite is never filled (Eccl. 6:7); we labor lifelong only to return naked as we came, leaving the fruits of our labor to another, who may be a fool besides (Eccl. 5:15; 2:19). The psalmist agrees: Man goes forth unto his labor until the evening; the span of our days is labor and sorrow, for it is soon cut off and we fly away (Ps. 104:23; 90:10).

Only Jesus Christ can change all that: “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). His gift is that a man may enjoy the good of his labor (Eccl. 3:13). His portion is that in all his labor a man may live joyfully with his wife; the two receive good reward for their labor; and their sleep is sweet (Eccl. 9:9; 4:9; 5:12). He sees our labor (Gen. 31:42). He gives the labor of the ungodly to the locust (Ps. 78:46), but gives us an inheritance for which we did not labor (Josh. 24:13). He assures we will eat the fruit of our labor (Ps. 128:2); the labor of the righteous tends to life; in all labor is profit;

and increase comes by labor (Prov. 10:16; 14:23; 13:11).

Some suppose that because of Jesus, we do not labor, we need not labor, and we are not called to labor. Physically we labor; spiritually we rest: God does all the labor; we do nothing. Now it is true that Jesus performs all labor in His kingdom, vineyard, and family. But He uses means. Us. Except the LORD build the house, they labor in vain that build it (Ps. 127:1). We still build. In spiritual life too, the talk of lips tends only to penury, the slothful cannot sleep, and the sluggard’s soul is empty (Prov. 14:23; 26:14; 13:4). Six days shalt thou labor, and not just physically, for even regarding the seventh day we must labor to enter into that rest (Heb. 4:11). The grand conclusion drawn by the apostle from the resurrection is not, “therefore retire, rest easy, and take a load off,” but rather, “be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (I Cor. 15:58).

Labor not to be rich (Prov. 23:4). Labor not for the meat that perishes. But labor. Labor for the meat that endures unto everlasting life (John 6:27). Labor, for every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor (I Cor. 3:8). Let him that stole (whether from God or man) steal no more, but rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing that is good (Eph. 4:28). Paul, that great apostle of Jesus Christ, labored (I Thess. 2:9), more abundantly (I Cor. 15:10), to please God (II Cor. 5:9), according to the working of Christ worked mightily in him (I Cor. 15:10). His friends, Mary, Trypena, Tryphosa, Persis, and Epaphras, labored (Rom 16:6, 12; Phil. 2:25). Churches of Jesus Christ labor (I Thess. 1:3; Rev. 2:3). Ministers, elders, and deacons of His gospel labor (I Thess. 5:12; I Tim. 5:17). We all, recipients of His grace, are hired, thus obligated, to labor faithfully in His vineyard (Matt. 20:1). Not of ourselves, but by that grace of God in us (I Cor. 15:10). And He is never unrighteous to forget our labor of love that we show toward His name (Heb. 6:10). So they who die in the Lord are blessed, that they may rest from their labors, and their works do follow them (Rev. 14:13). May we enjoy our labor today. ☺

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