

"Help Wanted"

"Help Wanted" signs are everywhere. So are "hiring" notices – it seems every firm is hiring. A Weis grocery store near us is offering a \$500 sign on bonus. Many businesses are finding it difficult to operate because they don't have enough employees. Several weeks ago someone told me that the Turkey Hill store near the church closes at 8 p.m. because they are short on workers. Recently there was an article in the newspaper indicating that there is a shortage of school bus drivers. A Montana school district is offering \$4,000 to sign on. A Delaware school district offered to pay parents \$700 to take care of their own transportation. A Pittsburgh district delayed the start of classes and said hundreds of children will have to walk to school.

Why the shortage of workers? One reason is that part of our federal government's response to COVID was to give \$600 a week (later \$300) unemployment benefits to those out of work because of COVID shutdowns (in addition to what benefits states were giving). That's more than what many people were making at their job. That's not much of an incentive to work! I can't ever remember so many employers looking for workers.

In light of this, I thought maybe it would be good to look at what the Bible says about work, labor. It's Labor Day weekend, so let's do that.

The Bible generally looks upon work – labor - in a positive way. Our Bible comes out of a Hebrew culture, and manual labor was honored among the Hebrews. This was different, for example, from the way Greeks viewed labor. To Greeks, work should be done by slaves and people of lesser status. But Hebrews regarded work as a *divine command* for everyone. One of the Ten Commandment is to keep the Sabbath. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work" (Exodus 20:9-10). We tend to focus on the back end of that command – rest on the 7th day – but the first part says that we work 6 days. (Let's not get hung up on the "6" days, like if you work part time or work 5 days a week you are violating the command). Even rabbis had to learn a trade in order to support themselves and their families, rather than getting paid for their religious duties (don't get any ideas now of taking away every pastor's salary!).

Many Scripture verses praise honest labor and condemn laziness. Proverbs 10:4-5 says, "Laziness brings poverty; hard work makes one rich. A wise son harvests in the summer; a disgraceful son sleeps right through the harvest." Ecclesiastes 10:18 tell us, "Through laziness the roof sags; through idle hands the house leaks." Heaven help you if you have neighbors too lazy to maintain their homes! Proverbs 6:6 is interesting: "Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise." Think of ants. Up at daybreak. Always busy, on the move. They don't need a supervisor to tell them what to do. You never see 10 ants standing around, leaning on a shovel, while 2 are doing the work! What a work ethic: diligent, energetic, self-starters! Of course, someone has said that we shouldn't be down on lazy people: they didn't do anything!

This same ethic of valuing honest labor carries over into the New Testament. Let's look at 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13. "Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that

they received from us" (2 Thessalonians 3:6). There were those in the church in Thessalonica who were living in idleness. Apparently some believed Jesus would return at any moment, so why bother to work? Notice, Paul writes, "according to the tradition that they received from us." This was the tradition: you work!

"For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate" (verses 7-9). Paul worked as a tentmaker and didn't rely on the church to pay him, even though he had every right to do this. He wanted to set an example for others of honest labor.

"For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (verse 10). You don't work, you don't eat. "For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living" (verses 11-12). They are to encourage and *command* the lazy people to get to work!

There's a verse in Ephesians that fits in here. It describes how we are to live if we've come to Christ and experience new life in Him. "Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy" (Ephesians 4:28).

So, generally speaking, in Scripture, work is regarded as part of the normal, natural and healthy routine of human life. Scriptures like these have given rise to the *Protestant work ethic* – which emphasizes hard work, thriftiness, and that we can fulfill our calling to serve and praise God through honest labor.

Perhaps the strongest affirmation of the goodness of honest work is the incarnation. When God chose to take on human flesh He did so as a carpenter, and was born into a working class, "blue collar", family. As someone has said, He was "incarnate in a village carpenter and not in a king or statesman or general or philosopher."

Doesn't our life experience affirm the value and satisfaction of honest labor? For instance, don't you feel good, don't you feel a sense of satisfaction, when you put yourself to a task and have accomplished it? Or when you've put in an honest day's work? I got my first job when I was maybe 14 or 15 years old. It was a paper route. I saved enough to buy a car. A brand new Chevy Corvette convertible! (Not really. It was a 10 year-old Oldsmobile 88 that drove like a tank. It was gray, and I had it painted powder blue!).

Scripture says that those willing to work hard should be rewarded. 2 Timothy 2:6 says, "The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive his share of the crops." There's just something within us that says that's fair. Right? Many of us have had an experience at work where a coworker doesn't give an honest day's work (maybe always taking breaks, extending lunch hour,

always texting or emailing). And especially if they're making the same money as we are, or more, or we wind up doing part of their job, that doesn't go over well, does it? It's hard to stay motivated to work hard if we feel we're not adequately compensated for our labor.

The Bible teaches that workers are entitled to decent pay for their efforts. The prophet Malachi spoke out in judgment against the employers of his day "who oppress the hired workers in their wages" (Malachi 3:5). Jesus Himself said "the laborer deserves to be paid" (Luke 10:7). Scripture emphasizes that workers are entitled to decent pay for their work.

But you say, "Harry, some people can't work." That's true. A person can be disabled, or having a lengthy recovery from an injury or accident. Scripture recognizes those unable to work. In both the Old and New Testaments God's people are commanded to care for those who cannot provide for themselves. Old Testament prophets spoke of the need to care for the poor and vulnerable. In Acts 6 we learn that the church daily distributed food to widows. The Book of James defines what true religion encompasses: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in distress, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:27). Biblical faith always has a concern for those who cannot provide for themselves.

So Scripture places high value on working, if we are able, and takes a dim view of laziness!

Let's look at some of the issues we're facing in the U.S. related to work and income – issues that often spark heated debate and division. There is the widening gap between the rich and the poor (studies and data indicate that this is happening). There is the debate over raising the minimum wage - what should the minimum wage be, what's fair and just for the worker, but also for the business owner who has to pay higher salaries?

The subject of income equality and the redistribution of wealth is a point of disagreement today - some so-called "progressive" politicians are pushing in this direction. Guaranteed income is another: remember, Presidential candidate Andrew Yang wanted to guarantee every American \$1,000 a month from the government; a number of U.S. cities are trying or will try pilot programs that give people a monthly amount to supplement their income – cities that include St. Paul, MN, Richmond VA, and Pittsburgh, PA). Then there is the push towards socialism: by politicians like Bernie Sanders. Studies indicate that Millennials favor socialism over capitalism.

What about all of this? I'm certainly no expert in the field of economics. All of these are complex issues. But let's see if the Scriptures can shed some light and wisdom here.

What about providing income for people who don't work? I think we would all agree that there needs to be a "safety net" for those who truly cannot provide for themselves. But what about other situations? For instance, the long standing debate over *public welfare* – and the people on welfare who could work, but won't. How do you weed out those who work the system from those who are doing their best to be self-supporting, but come up short? It's difficult! But shouldn't that be the goal of government – whether local, state or national?

As I've said, some are pushing for *guaranteed income*. For those working hard, and barely able to make it, an extra amount each month could be a godsend. But how do you identify these people from those who don't need government money? Whatever the government hands out – who pays for it? We do – the taxpayers. Someone has said that every dollar given to someone who doesn't work is a dollar taken from someone who does work. Maybe that's a bit simplistic, but isn't there some truth in it!

Some politicians are promoting "income equality" and "redistribution of wealth." Should everybody have the same income? Should those who work hard and earn a good wage be *forced* to give part of that to those who don't make as much? *In light of Scripture, I don't think so.*

But some may argue that in the New Testament, Christians pooled their resources and lived a kind of communal life. That is true. We read about this in Acts, chapter 4. "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common...there was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:32, 34-35). This took place very early in the Christian movement. There was such unity among believers that it was tangibly expressed in their giving up private ownership and sharing with other followers of Jesus. But note this: It was done *willingly*, not *forced* on any of them. And this kind of economic experiment didn't last long.

This is far different from a kind of *socialism* where everyone is *forced* to give up any private property. As I've said, there is a movement towards socialism in our country. Capitalism and the free enterprise system is looked upon as the problem, the evil. Where we ultimately come out on this will play a huge role in determining what our country looks like in the future. Noted pastor, author, and church consultant Bill Easum once listed his predictions for the year 2050. One is that the U.S. will have become a socialist country.

There is no one form of government that is "Christian" or commanded in the Bible. Capitalism has its weaknesses and drawbacks. But in my opinion, the history of socialism, and communism, has been bleak. What seems to happen is a few people running the country become super rich – and most everyone else lives in poverty. I think there's something to be said for an economic system where honest labor is rewarded, and people are permitted to own private property and not have it taken away and given to someone else by the government.

Let me share one more point. *Our work should not become our God.* We can become a workaholic. This is always indicative of some deeper emotional need or psychological issue that's unhealthy and dysfunctional. Some people (especially men) tend to define themselves solely in terms of their job. Our whole life should not be wrapped up in our job. Jesus said, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (John 6:27). God created us so that work should be a normal, healthy part of our life. But it alone can't satisfy the soul, or give life ultimate meaning. Only a relationship with God through Christ can do that.

