

# Work For Good & For Giving

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[ 0 : 00 ] The following message was given at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! Ephesians chapter 4. And we are going to read from this glorious letter one single verse, verse 28. It says this, Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Enough was enough. Mark Rober was sick and tired of people stealing packages off of his front porch.

Little did they know, the porch pirates were recorded and Mark decided to prepare a special bait package for their next heist. Being an engineer, Mark made it so that as soon as this package was opened, that stolen package would automatically explode with glitter and spray a skunk smell all over the robber.

[ 1 : 41 ] There's something so glorious about watching payback like that, right? Nobody likes to be stolen from.

We like to see thieves come to justice. But thieves take more than one form. There are the kids raiding the cookie jar like at my house when nobody's looking.

There's sophisticated multi-million dollar embezzlement schemes or price gouging like those guys that sold the hand sanitizer for like 70 times what it was worth during COVID.

Or there's cutting corners on taxes and forms or leaving work early while others are left to pick up the slack. Or scrolling through social media while on the company clock.

Though it comes in many forms, the similarity is that all of these have a self-centered focus on getting rather than giving.

[ 2 : 50 ] The thief lives for himself. He uses his tools, including his very hands, forgetting, not forgiving.

And not only does the thief steal, he also has a warped view of work. The movie, O Brother, Where Art Thou? opens with a song called Big Rock Candy Mountains.

And the tune features this vagabond looking for what he thinks is the good life. And he sings that in this ideal place, there ain't no short handle shovels, no axes, saws, or picks.

I'm a going to stay where you sleep all day. Where they hung the jerk that invented work in the Big Rock Candy Mountains. So essentially, he dreams of a life that is self-indulgent, lazy, and anti-work.

Is this really the ideal? Is this what we're after? Well, God has something different. Something better for us.

[ 3 : 59 ] You see, the Lord does not leave us as thieves. He transforms our vision for work. And the good news of Jesus Christ is that he sets us free from selfishness so that we can serve.

The Lord changes the very tools that we used to use for selfish reasons to now be used for good. So he frees our hands from stealing for ourselves so that we can use our hands to work good for others.

And he doesn't merely want us to just stop the bad. He wants us to embrace the good. So our verse this morning lays out a path forward for former thieves to thrive in God-glorifying, neighbor-helping, church-building, mission-advancing work.

So I believe the main point for us this morning is very simply, in view of God's work for us in Christ, work hard for good and forgiving, especially within the church.

I'm going to break this into three points come from the text, I trust. Stop being a thief. Start working for good. And give generously to your neighbor.

[ 5 : 20 ] So point number one, stop being a thief. It says right here, let the thief no longer steal. The word here for stealing in this verse is not like a violent robbery that might come to mind, but stealing secretly.

It seems to have in mind here kind of the temptations that look more like dignified or reasonable on the surface. But underneath is the same self-seeking, self-preserving impulse that moves them to action.

So stealing, like I said, takes many forms. But if we're to look under the hood, the fuel that fires the engine of stealing is covetousness, laziness, fear, and selfishness.

Think about covetousness. Think about it. It's this insatiable desire for something that belongs to someone else. I remember desiring one of the cool coins for my cousin's coin collection.

And I asked if I could have his half dollar. And he said no. So what did I do? I grabbed it when he wasn't looking, right before my family left.

[ 6 : 41 ] I want it. I must have it. So I steal it. That's the sin of covetousness. And some steal because of laziness.

This is the sloth. The slug. The parasite. They won't do things for themselves.

So they feed on others. They stay up late. They sleep in late. They shirk responsibility. Just claim everything is just too difficult.

They don't produce. They only take. Some steal because of fear. The fearful person thinks, I won't have enough.

Or I don't have enough. What am I going to do? And their fear and their insecurity just, it blinds them to God's promise to provide sufficiently.

[ 7 : 46 ] And perhaps the most significant fuel is selfishness. I'm only thinking of myself and what's good for me and what I want and what I can enjoy. And selfishness is, it's so self-justifying.

I deserve this, don't I? I can do more or I can do better with this than that other person that has it. Covetousness, laziness, fear, selfishness. All of these things can move us towards stealing. What's the consequence of these things?

Well, the outlook of the thief makes fellowship impossible. It makes trust impossible.

It makes unity impossible. I mean, the concern Paul has here is rooted in this overall concern for the unity in Christ. So if believers are members of one body, how can there ever be unity and fellowship when each member is out for themselves?

[ 8 : 52 ] I mean, just imagine a person attempting to steal from himself. Can you imagine it? He has a quarter in one hand. And then the other hand busies itself trying to sneak up and then starts to pry the quarter out of the other hand.

And there is having this warfare against itself. I mean, that would just look absolutely absurd to us. And this is exactly Paul's point here. Rather than working together so that the whole body flourishes, the self-seeking goals divide.

This is the work of the enemy. He came to steal, kill, and destroy. That's what he does. And because of this, God stands against thieves.

In the old covenant community, God gave the command in Exodus 20, you shall not steal. One of the ten.

But in the context of the new covenant community, in the church, Paul connects that same commandment as an expression of the greatest commandment.

[ 10 : 10 ] In Romans 13, he writes, So all the commands, all of them, including do not steal, are summed up in loving God and loving neighbor.

Jim Hamilton says it this way, the thief exalts himself and his desire over God and the people being robbed, inverting the two great commands.

So you see, to steal is an expression of sinful rebellion toward God and his people. That's what it does.

And God opposes this kind of rebellion. 1 Corinthians lays this out. He says, Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?

Do not be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

[ 11 : 40 ] So how can the thief stop stealing? When I ask that, I'm really asking, how can the covetous, lazy, fearful, selfish person change?

How can the thief who has exalted himself and his desire over God and the people being robbed be forgiven and transformed?

Oh, my friends, we have to read on in 1 Corinthians 6. Because it does say the thieves will not inherit the kingdom of God, but it doesn't stay there.

Because in verse 11, it says, and such were some of you. But you were washed. You were sanctified.

You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. Ladies and gentlemen, you were a thief. But now you are different.

[12:45] You were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified. You were justified. You stole. But God worked to buy back what was rightfully his to begin with.

Can you believe that? Jesus said in Mark 10 that he came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus came to ransom thieves. While he hung on the cross, if you remember the story, one thief crucified next to him said, I'm getting what I deserve.

But Jesus is innocent. Listen, this thief believed Jesus was who he said he was, and he asked to be remembered. And you know what happened to this thief?

This repentant thief, Jesus said, today you will be with me in paradise. Hallelujah. The same offer that that thief received, it's available here today.

[13:50] It's available to any thief in here. Jesus paid for all the debts of sin against you. If you confess your need and receive his forgiveness, he will change you from the inside out.

That's what he does. You are no longer a thief. That's not who you are anymore. I mean, just imagine, imagine with me for a moment that your life is an abandoned restaurant on the side of the road.

It's inhabited by squatters. Squatters. Run down and completely unproductive. Nothing good going on. It's a desolate place. But then, it's purchased by a new owner.

And the signs put out front, under new management. God has purchased you through Jesus Christ. You may be the same old building on the outside, but you are under new management.

Keep in mind here that Paul is writing to Christians. He's writing to believers. These people, even though they were Christians, were not instantly and completely perfect.

[15:04] Otherwise, Paul would not have written a letter to Christians to put away lying, to stop being angry, without sinning, and to stop stealing, etc.

My friends, maybe you are struggling with remaining sin in your life. You are under new management, but the renovations are continual.

They're continual. You can stop being a thief. That's not who you are anymore. And I want to urge you to ask the manager to continue the renovations.

Please, ask him to scrape off the chip paint of covetousness, and replace it with the paint of thankfulness. Ask him to change the blinking bulb of laziness and replace it with the light of zeal.

Ask him. Ask him to rewire the fear with a surge of godly trust. Ask him to remove the boards of your selfishness so you can see out the window to be others focused.

[16:14] Ask him, and he loves to answer these prayers. The second point, start working for good.

Our verse continues. It says, but rather, let him labor doing honest work with his own hands.

We see here that Christianity is ultimately not about stopping the bad. It doesn't stay there. It's also about starting the good.

We belong to the Lord now. So, the hands we used to steal with for selfish reasons are now used to work for selfless reasons.

The term labor here, it means to work to the point of weariness. It's this word to describe this toilsome, manual labor.

[17:17] This is how we are to work as those who belong to the Lord. We're to work, to labor to the point of weariness.

But it's not just any kind of work. It says we are to do honest work. It literally means working what is good.

So, how can we work what is good? It means we can also work what is bad. So, what's the difference? How do we know? Well, the sins of covetousness, laziness, fear, selfishness, they not only motivate the bad of stealing, they can also distort the good of working.

We can work in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons. I mean, there's some work you can think of that is inherently wrong. Being a hitman is wrong work.

Right? Pirating movies, selling illegal firearms, making adult films, these are all wrong work.

[18:29] Even if you can make money, they are in direct defiance against God's law. Wrong. But there's also good work done in wrong ways.

For instance, Tim Keller points out that if you try to find your identity and your worth or your purpose in your work, it will do one of two things.

It will either go to your head or it will go to your heart. When you do your work well, it can puff your head up with pride. Look at me! Look at what I've done!

And you start to find your value in what you do. Or, you do your work poorly and you don't measure up to the expectation and then it sinks down and it poisons your heart with self-pity and condemnation and worthlessness.

Well, in both cases, work, the thing you're doing is functioning as your God. Our work was meant to be for God.

[19:45] It was never meant to be God. This is a very wrong way to work. Jim Hamilton says, how a man understands himself, his fundamental assumptions about the world, God, and his own sense of purpose will be made manifest, be revealed in the way he does his work.

We need a new vision. We need a new vision for working what is good. What is God's vision for our work?

Work? Well, it has to begin with God. Work must be anchored in the character of God. In fact, even this chapter, chapter 4, it culminates in pointing to the character of God.

If you look at chapter 5, verse 1, therefore, after all he said these things, therefore, be imitators of God as his beloved children.

So, what can we learn about work from the God who made work? Well, first, God himself worked to create and to cultivate life.

[21:03] The very beginning, very first verse, Genesis 1, 1, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

You see, God was the original worker. We even see the language of work assigned to him in Genesis 2. It says on the seventh day that God finished his work and all that he had done and he rested.

And then as the crown of all of God's creative, life-giving work, he made mankind. And to man he gave this charge in Genesis 1, 28.

God blessed them and God said to them, be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, have dominion over the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth. Just take a look at some of the verbs in this passage. God tells man to be fruitful and multiply. I mean, he's highlighting the work, the good work of a husband and a wife, bearing children and raising them up.

[22:12] It's good work. Moms, it's good work. Diapering your children is good work, teaching them what not to do. Don't touch this up. It's good work. He loves that work. It's good.

He wants them to bring forth life in the context of love and relationship. And then he calls them to fill the earth. These families are intended to multiply, to develop into communities, civilizations that interact, that build, that work.

And then he charges them to subdue the earth, have dominion. People were made to work and rule over the earth. This working and ruling, it reflects the goodness of God as the creator and the king. He's the ultimate worker and ruler. And so we are made in the image of God and our work reflects God's work.

And notice also that all of the work is inherently good. God works and man is created to work in the garden before sin is even on the scene.

[23:34] So contrary to life in the Big Rock Candy Mountains, work is not to be avoided but to be embraced. It's a gift. But it's also cursed.

It's not the curse but it is under a curse. Curse made work hard. The weeds now grow along with the vegetables but working the garden is still good.

So if you are going to work for the good then we must see that our work is ultimately for God. Colossians 3 says whatever you do work heartily as for the Lord and not for men.

But does this contradict our passage? I thought we were supposed to give to others. This is saying work for God. No it doesn't. It clarifies the ultimate priority of our work.

As with all of life it's to be done to bring honor to God even in sharing with others. In other words our goal is to please God not simply to please ourselves and to please man.

[ 25 : 00 ] Notice that the Lord does not highlight in this verse Colossians 3 doesn't highlight the what of their work. He says whatever you do anything whatever you do he underlines instead the how and the who of the work.

Work heartily as for the Lord. The how and the who. So whatever thing you are doing do it as if you are working for the Lord.

You are first and foremost a servant of Jesus Christ. That's wonderfully freeing. It's wonderfully freeing because you can do this no matter where you are and what work you are doing.

You can work heartily as for the Lord. You can do it. Where are you stationed in life right now? Where does God, where has he placed you right now?

How has the Lord positioned you to serve him through serving others? When you treat your work as if you are working directly for Jesus Christ, the recipients of that service, they get a glimpse of God's loving, selfless service through your work.

[ 26 : 20 ] And when working for people as if we were ultimately serving Jesus himself, even what might initially seem like drudgery, it's transformed into an expression of worship.

I started to have this shift personally whenever I was working at a youth camp a few years ago. And during an off season, I mean, a lot of time was spent just simple maintenance.

It's spraying for weeds, it's mowing, it's edging, it's mopping, it's cleaning toilets. And I was reflecting on these very truths and these verses and I began to see my labor in a whole new light. I began to think, how should I mow this if Jesus was going to walk here? How should I scrub this toilet if I know Jesus is going to be using it all week, this week?

The king is coming. So what would it look like for you to work as if the king was on his way? What would it look like for you to work to bring him honor through the way that you serve?

[ 27 : 30 ] Trinity Grace, what would the impact be if we put our hands to the plow like this with these truths in our hearts? How countercultural would that be? I mean, we no longer would join the chorus of the big rock candy mountain seekers complaining about a bad case of the Mondays.

I know that we often say I wish tomorrow were Sunday and I totally agree. It is a glorious day. I love this gathering but Monday is coming.

So what if Sunday overflowed into Monday? What would that be like? What would it look like to have God at the center of whatever we engaged in all week long?

Think of your work this way. would it not be an occasion for thankfulness to the Lord? Would it not be an occasion to cultivate contentment? An occasion for faithfulness to what God has entrusted to you today?

Would it not be an occasion to glorify God in excellence and doing something with excellence? An occasion to point unbelievers to the Lord and his goodness? It would be an occasion to be profitable, to make money.

[ 28 : 47 ] Money is good. Let's make a bunch of money. Let's just not love it and let's use it. Specifically, point number three, so that we can give generously to our neighbors.

Point number three, give generously to your neighbor. Our text, if you look back down at it, the whole point of working what is good is so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

So you no longer steal for selfish gain and you no longer work for selfish gain. salvation. In fact, in our text, there's no self-in-sight.

Not even self-fulfillment. We're often encouraged to work hard to find a fulfilling job that matches our gifts and our talents.

But honestly, this is not the case for most people in the world nor most people in history. So we must be careful not to get overly focused on self-fulfillment in our work.

[ 30 : 19 ] I mean, sure, we want to utilize our gifts. Absolutely. However, self-fulfillment should not be the driving priority of our conversation. Chasing the dream job to find our greatest joy.

To do that, it's like getting lost in a hall of mirrors and they're all pointed at yourself. Instead, the New Testament, it shows us that our work is still good even if our vocation is not our choosing.

Even then, I mean, consider Paul's self-description. If you look at the beginning of this very chapter, Ephesians 4.1, he says, I, therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

You see, Paul's vision for his vocation is not first and foremost based on what he wants or what he's interested in or what he feels he's most suited for.

He's been set free from himself and he's now a prisoner for the Lord. He no longer belongs to himself. He belongs to the Lord.

[ 31 : 39 ] He's been bought with a price. And so now his labor is bound up with whatever the Lord sees fit to do with his life and serve his mission.

Paul is motivated by a completely different set of priorities. So be careful. This is my plea to be careful not to make self-fulfillment the main filter for how good your work is.

The realities are economic pressures increase. Layoffs happen. Many never get the jobs that they desire their whole life.

And others have to leave the jobs that they love. So Brian Chappell asked the question we all want to ask when we're met with harsh realities like these.

Can I do what God wants if I can't do what I want? His answer is yes. Yes.

[ 32 : 45 ] Even if you cannot do what you want you can still do what I want. we have a different set of priorities to guide us.

My friends if you are Christian that's the most important thing about you and your identity not what you do. You're a Christian first. You are a Christian first.

And what you used to use for yourself it now belongs to the Lord. now you are called to work heartily for the Lord in whatever way seems fit to him.

And now we see the goal of this work you work for the good of others. Klein Snodgrass says it this way our goal is not enjoyment it is productivity so that we can give.

we do not exist for ourselves but for relations with other people and with God. We see that we are called by the living God to be generous but who are the anyones that Paul's talking about in this text?

[ 34 : 02 ] Is this just any person anyone that we come across or anyone who says that they have a need? Are there any priorities for this generosity?

Or we can find help. We can find help from Paul because Paul makes it clear in his letter to Timothy that believers must work to provide for their relatives. It's a huge priority 1 Timothy 5 if anyone does not provide for his own relatives and especially for members of his household he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

So to deny this responsibility responsibility is to shirk the priorities of the Lord in our work. In other words if you have dependents you must do everything in your power to provide for their needs not their wants their needs to do otherwise is to be sub-Christian in your work.

And as Christians we are to have a generous disposition toward all people. we want to be generous with all people but especially those who are in the household of faith.

Galatians 6 Paul writes so then as we have opportunity let us do good to everyone and then especially to those who are of the household of faith.

[ 35 : 28 ] So this means that we are to have an eager disposition for generosity in the context of the local church. church. So we got to be careful not to generalize the principle of working and sharing with those in need too broadly because this verse is situated in a very specific context.

Paul has been addressing believers with an emphasis on a radical transcultural unity in Jesus Christ. I mean think back to chapter two it highlighted the gospel for those dead in sin.

Grace has come to those who were far off and those who were near making one new man in Jesus Christ. Chapter four began by emphasizing this new unity through the body being built up in love in Jesus Christ.

And now Paul he's highlighting particular applications of walking this new life out together in practice. Christ. So the accent here is on the sharing of goods especially among other Christians.

The sharing of goods especially among other Christians. We see this theme is all over the New Testament. Generosity particularly to fellow believers was to be the central norm of the Christian life.

[ 36 : 56 ] This is not to say that believers should not help the needy among non-Christians. It's not what I'm saying. Paul urges his readers to do good to all people but they have a special

responsibility to those in the household of faith.

And if you remember the neighbor in verse 25 just a couple verses ago the neighbor was a reference to fellow believers. So we can see this principle in action in the early days of the New Testament church.

Remember in Acts 4 the birthday of the church has happened and it says there was not a needy person among them. There's the neediness. The needy person among them.

For as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to each as any had need.

It's the principle being carried out right there in the context of the believing community, the local church. church and we continue to see the hard work and the generous provision of these and the church to be cared for and then the gospel to go forward.

[ 38 : 08 ] Think about the early church. It was meeting in homes. It was meeting in homes. Priscilla and Aquila's house in Romans 16, Nympha's house in Colossians 4, Philemon's house in Philemon 1, Lydia's house in Acts 14.

Acts 4, they were breaking bread in their homes. The homes were the context, personal homes, the context to extend hospitality for the sake of the church. Another need was missionaries like Paul who were deployed and sustained through Christian hospitality.

Think of this. The church at Philippi, when Paul was imprisoned, the church at Philippi sent Epaphroditus to minister to his need.

He's providing from one church to provide for Paul's need. The companions are listed as patrons, ones that finance gospel mission, Aristarchus, Jason, Sopater, so many of these folks using their money to extend the mission.

And believers were constantly encouraged to extend hospitality. We use that word in one way, but the original word literally means love of strangers.

[ 39 : 29 ] Philozenia, love of strangers. So these weren't random strangers like anyone that needs a home. These were strangers traveling evangelists, believers, who relied on the generosity of local believers to host them and to care for their needs.

It's ministering to the needs physically of the local church. church. And then you see benevolence. Benevolence was extended to believers both locally and extra locally in other churches to care for physical needs, such as the believing widows of the church in Jerusalem being a very explicit one. The offering collected in Antioch to care for a church that had been subject to famine. They didn't have enough food, so one church sent food to another church. church. In other words, what we see is that those in the early church were not lovers of money, they were leveragers of money.

You see that? Not lovers of money, but leveragers of money. They saw the work of their hands as an opportunity to generously provide for the needs of other believers and advance the mission to make disciples.

disciples. So our work, brothers and sisters, our work cannot be divorced from the goal of the Christian life.

[ 40 : 54 ] The church mission statement that we have is not just for when you are at church. It's a summary of the Christian life. I mean, we can put our individual names in the church mission statement to remind us we're representative workers within this local church in this community.

For instance, Taylor works to make disciples of Jesus Christ who makes disciples in Athens and beyond for the glory of God. Put your name in there.

Whatever thing God has called you to, this is the work he's assigned to you for this very reason. Our individual labors come to bear on this collective purpose.

We are no longer thieves divided against each other. We are members of one body in Jesus Christ and we're helping one another strive forward for the glory of God.

Martin Luther once asked a bricklayer, what are you doing? And the bricklayer replied, I'm laying bricks. And Luther then asked the worker beside him, what are you doing?

[ 42 : 06 ] And that bricklayer said, I'm building a cathedral to the glory of God. We've been bought with a price. We belong to the Lord.

So let's allow Sunday to overflow into Monday. In view of God's work for us in Christ, work hard for good and forgiving, especially within the church.

May God help us. Let's pray. Lord, O Lord, we are not our own. You worked for thieves to change our direction completely.

You've given us a new mission, not to live for ourselves, but to work for the good and forgiving. So Lord, help us to do that with an accent on the mission you've entrusted to us to make disciples. May your name be made great because of these workers in here and all the things we put our hands to. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen. You've been listening to a message at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens.

[ 43 : 21 ] For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at [TrinityGraceAthens.com](http://TrinityGraceAthens.com)  
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