

Going to Work – 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

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Many of you know who Ashton Kutcher is. Many of you don't. He's a guy in his 40s who grew up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and then became a famous actor. He starred on "That 70s Show" and "Two and a Half Men."

He was also married to the actress Demi Moore for a time. Ashton Kutcher also received attention for a speech he made at the "Teen Choice Awards" a few years back. He was given an award for whatever they give awards for on the Teen Choice Awards. And he used his acceptance speech as a platform to speak to the hundreds of teenagers in the audience and thousands more watching on television.

His remarks contained comments we don't normally hear from celebrities. In a world where the perception is that one becomes successful by just being famous (or a social influencer, as they call them now), Kutcher went out of his way to challenge that theory. He spoke of what truly makes an individual attractive to another—being smart, thoughtful, and generous. He also talked about living life in a way that emphasizes achievement and possibility. But he began his remarks by talking about opportunity and where opportunity in life comes from. And he linked opportunity to hard work.

He told of growing up in Iowa (he's a Hawkeye fan, by the way, but we'll let that slide) and the jobs he had as a kid. He told of how having one job led to another and that every job he had was not beneath him. The only job that was beneath him was not having a job.

He went on to emphasize the importance of hard work and tried to debunk the myth that success comes with just waiting around and hoping somebody is going to give you something.

He emphasized work—having a job and not quitting one’s job until you had another job. This had to be music to the ears of every parent of a teenager.

Maybe Kutcher noticed what many others in our society have noticed. In tough times, we are more likely sometimes to give up and take it easy than work to get back on our feet. It seems we are more likely to sit back and wait for somebody to help us rather than working to help ourselves.

Today’s young people: are they lazy? Are they more likely to sit around and do nothing if it’s up to them? And we shouldn’t leave seasoned adults out of this either. Are there more adults who would choose the easy way or the way of work? There’s no hard and fast rule on this. But just in case one advocates for sitting around and thinks it might be the secret to a long and happy life, we pick up our Bibles and we see these words from 2 Thessalonians.

The writer is crystal clear about avoiding a life of idleness, of eating anyone’s bread without paying for it, or of not eating unless one has worked.

The writer insists to the faithful of this town and region that they should do their work quietly and earn their own living. “Brothers and sisters,” he says, “do not be weary in doing what is right.”

In researching this text this week, it was not clear as to why the writer chose to lift up work as a critical component of the faith-filled life. Other than an overall theme of avoiding disorderliness and being a burden on others, we don’t know what specific issue or issues caused this writer to focus in on the importance of work.

Maybe it was simply the same common sense that proliferates every generation that motivated the writer to lift up work.

What do we know about work but have to be reminded of from time to time? Whether it’s work that involves paid employment or simply the everyday work that must be done to get along in life, we know inside of ourselves the value of doing something. And while there are enormous benefits to resting and simply being (we call it

having a healthy work-life balance), those benefits aren't quite as sweet without the work that must come before our rest.

At our house, a common refrain that our boys hear from me is, "Work before play. Work before play. Get your work done first and there will be plenty of time to play." Finally, one day after I had been saying that and harping at them to get their little chores done, Joey said, "Dad, I'm really getting sick of hearing that."

What's the value of work—beyond making a living and providing for one's self or one's family (pretty important)?

First, work gets us out of the doldrums. There are often factors in our lives that leave us depressed, discouraged, angered, or sad. And many times we have little control over them. We didn't *cause* these factors to affect us so negatively. And yet we are faced with confronting them. How do we deal with them?

Work is often the best way. Finding the ability to focus with laser-like precision on a work task—whether it be at the office or at home—and devoting our full energy to it can often lift us out of the malaise we have found ourselves wallowing in. We can control the outcome of our work much of the time. If we do our jobs, we will find the self-worth that is often unable to be found anywhere else.

Second, work makes our rest more relaxing and fun. If our workday hasn't been too work-filled, in other words, if we haven't found much productive work in a given day, play or rest at the end of it isn't going to be as rewarding. Work inspires play; work enables play to be more joyful and uplifting, work enables the relationships we value to be tended to with greater commitment and enjoyment in our moments of play.

In the creation story, God rested on the Sabbath day. At the end of the sixth day of work, God saw all that he had created and called it good. His work had been hard and exhausting, but the reward of seeing his work completed made that seventh day—a day of rest—one of blessing and holiness.

Work can get us out of the doldrums, work makes our rest more relaxing and fun, and, third, work in the context of our faith is the proper and joyful response to God's gift of grace.

Thanksgiving is not far away. And in this run-up to it, we should be pausing more often to count the ways in which we are blessed (10,000 Reasons to Bless the Lord is the song the ensemble will soon do). And when we give thanks, we give thanks to the God who made us, forgives us, saves us, and grants us the people and opportunities in which we find joy.

And that sparks in us the need to respond in some way. And when we are so overwhelmed with God's blessing, after sitting in stunned silence for a moment, we feel compelled to do something. We feel the need to give back something in honor of the one who has given us first so much.

And our doing is our work. We work to come alongside another in need, we work to instruct or mentor another in faith, we work to assure that the message of Jesus' redemptive love is known to all.

Back in Nebraska where we lived prior to moving here, our church and I were involved in a prison ministry to inmates and ex-offenders in Omaha. We led worship for them and brought a home-cooked meal.

These men and women had little, if any, financial resources. Their incarceration came often, in part, as a result of their poverty. So, they didn't have much cash in their pockets.

And yet, this reality did not preclude us from taking up an offering during that service. An offering. Now, to some, it might have seemed inappropriate to do so, considering we wanted to give them the gift—the gift of welcome and good news of Jesus' love for them. It seems odd that we would invite these people, then, to give of what little money they had.

But, the point was this: All of us, no matter our lot in life, are indebted to God, are called to do something in response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. This is true for those of us whose

portfolios are flush with cash and for those of us who have next to nothing. We are all called to work, and work in the name of faith means giving—giving back at least a portion of the blessing we have received.

At the end of the service today, we all will be asked to do something, to bring forward our commitments to support the work of the church in 2023. We will be asked to work—not for our salvation, not for a greater love from God, but in response to how good we have it.

Our theme is “taking care of our community, our church, and each other.” And our love is born out of the love God has for us. These commitments, this important work, will be the appropriate response to the blessings we have received. The blessing that follows, much like our rest or play, will be that much sweeter in the end.