

"The Protestant Work Ethic"
(sermon given 7/4/10 by Scott Jansen)
Galatians 6:1-10

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[Prayer for Illumination] O God of every nation, we set aside the busyness of our schedules to bow humbly before you, and to rejoice in your Creation. Help us to appreciate your world with eyes that perceive your Spirit.... Amen.

Well Happy 4th of July to you all! It's hard to celebrate the 4th without some reference to politics. So, rather than try to dance around the subject, I thought we'd hit it straight on, especially since our reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians has so much to say about our modern politics. Try to guess which modern political party Paul would endorse, as you listen now for God's word for you....

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.

All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads.

Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher. Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

Amen. So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.

The official name for this holiday is “Independence Day,” but that’s an outdated concept. In the decades right after the Revolutionary War, Americans would celebrate our independence from Great Britain, often by constructing little dolls that looked like Tory soldiers and throwing things at them. But, today, Great Britain is our best friend in the world, so celebrating our distance from them doesn’t really resonate anymore.

So, as much as I like to talk about the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and how the only clergyman who signed that document was Presbyterian, and how the early Presbyterians were so central to the independence movement that the Revolutionary War was called “The Presbyterian Revolt” by the King of England...; nevertheless, I think that “independence,” per se, is not relevant anymore.

Instead of calling this “Independence Day” we should call it... “Isn’t it great that we live in such a wonderful country?” day. That’s what this holiday is about. And notice I put that in the form of a question—isn’t-it-great-that-we-live-in-such-a-wonderful-country day—because not everyone answers that question the same way. Often times, our feelings toward the country follow our feelings toward the current federal government, and which party is in power at the moment. We celebrate how great our country is much more enthusiastically... when the folks for whom we voted are running the show.

But I want to suggest that we do have a great country, not because of who is in office on any particular day. A big part of our greatness stems from our social attitude toward work—an attitude that was shaped, for the most part, by the apostle Paul and the theologian John Calvin.

To explain, first we have to look at the world in which Paul was raised. For thousands of years, most of the people in the ancient civilizations were slaves. They were either born slaves, or they were captured in some shifting tides of war. The assumption was that the winners of the wars were favoured by the gods, and therefore the losers deserved to be slaves, since the gods obviously did not favor them. Slaves were considered the lowest form of human, if they were considered human at all.

This is a hard concept for us to get our modern heads around. Work... was considered dirty, low class, even immoral. The goal of

those who thought of themselves as morally pure was to sit on a throne and do nothing all day but eat peeled grapes....

There are many references in the Bible about beauty, wherein beauty stems from the fairness of one's skin. In other words, those who did the least work, who spent the least time outside, were considered most beautiful—both physically and spiritually. This ancient attitude toward work is reflected in the author's words in Genesis chapter three, when we hear God expelling humans from paradise with the punishment that... “now you will have to work.” Work was God's curse for disobedience. The ground was cursed, and the work needed to get food from it was cursed. So the moral person would try to avoid such an immoral activity. My son has a t-shirt that reads, “Hard work never hurt anyone, but I'm not going to risk it.”.....

During the Middle Ages, when feudal lords ruled the castle, the serfs did all the work—those of lowest station. The feudal lords only worried about their military prowess, since they had no intention of ever providing arms to the serfs. The lords didn't help out in the fields, even at harvest time. That would have been considered degrading, even immoral.

You can even see this in the animal world—among lions or among ants. The military leaders don't do any hard work—that's left for the masses of peasants.

So this attitude toward work was pretty much universal, and it went essentially unchallenged for millennia.... Until, a guy named John Calvin came along in the fifteen hundreds, and said, let's take the Biblical letters of Paul seriously. Paul says some things in this passage that strike us as pretty basic, but were actually incredibly revolutionary in his day.

Paul was an apostle, a man who had encountered God, and who was sent into the world to deliver God's message. He was inspired with an idea that no human would have developed naturally. Paul believed that work was morally good.... Now..., he had been born into privilege, a Roman citizen, a leader of the Pharisees. He did not have to work, nor was he expected to work. Nevertheless, Paul worked tirelessly, travelling from city to city, establishing churches and spreading the good news of the gospel. Paul was not ashamed of his work. He considered it his greatest honor that God had chosen him to become an apostle.

But Paul didn't see himself as unique in this regard. He didn't teach that work was only good for apostles. He thought it was a

universal truth that work... is morally good.... But, somehow, that message was too radical, too extreme, for it to take any root in society.... It had to soak in awhile, until Calvin came along and read Paul's letter to the Galatians.

The so-called "Protestant Work Ethic" was the result of Calvin's interpretation of Paul's thoughts. Calvin understood work as a moral good. Like Paul, Calvin worked tirelessly, preaching three hour sermons on a daily basis, and churning out page after page of written material faster than just about anyone ever. Calvin thought it was a great blessing to be able to work, to be able to contribute something positive to the world. In fact, Calvin went as far as saying that our ability to work comes directly from God, therefore if someone has no ability to work, that person is probably not loved by God.... I, personally, am not comfortable with that idea, but it did play a huge role in shaping this country—simply by virtue of the peer pressure of folks wanting to be known as someone whom God loved....

Our government..., and more importantly, our social norms, were shaped largely by Presbyterians who were following Calvin's teachings. So, in the U.S., it has always been the norm to think of hard work as a moral good. We are the most productive work force in the world, largely because of Presbyterian influence. So, it's appropriate to take a moment on this day to remember how wonderful our country is, and how much of that is because of our Presbyterian ancestors....

But I said we were going to talk about politics, and now we get right down to it. Today, nearly all of our political battles can be traced to this passage from Paul. On the one side, we have those who despise laziness, and on the other side we have those who despise gluttony. Those who hate laziness would cite verses 4 and 5, where Paul says, "All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads." In other words, don't sit around and let your neighbor work, and expect to benefit from the fruit of your neighbor's work. There is individual responsibility. Because work is a moral good, laziness is a sin....

But on the other side of the political aisle, there are those who despise the sin of gluttony. They would cite Paul's verses two and ten—"Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.... So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all...." In other words, our very ability to work is a

gift from God, not something we've earned. Our physical health and our mental capacity come from God. Thus, work, for Paul, is an "opportunity" for us to bear one another's burdens for the good of all. If we think that all the fruit of our labor should be stockpiled endlessly for our own pleasures, we're not acknowledging the good gift that God has given us—thus, we are guilty of gluttony. As Paul puts it, we deceive ourselves and think that we are something when, in reality, we are nothing.

These two arguments form the root of most of our political debates today. Some will focus on those who are lazy. You can always find someone who could be working harder, someone who is sponging off of others out of sheer laziness. Paul says to the lazy, don't think you can just rely on your neighbors to work for you. In another passage, Paul says, if you are unwilling to work, then no one should give you anything to eat. Of course, that doesn't apply to those who want to work but don't have an opportunity to work. But..., Paul could be quite harsh on those who were lazy.

On the other hand, you can always find someone who is gluttonous and privileged—someone who was born with all the right family contacts for the business world, and all the best education, and all the best medical care; who uses the power of that privilege only for self. Paul says to such folks, don't forget that the ability to work a good job, the gifts of your mental capacity, and all your blessings—these are not of your doing. You owe much of your good fortune to God's grace, and therefore you should work for the good of all....

The point is, both of our major political parties can find solid support for their positions in the writings of Paul. Those who think that laziness is a sin because work is good... can quote from Paul. And those who think that the ability to work, the ability to earn money, is a good gift from God, and therefore should be shared as God commands... can quote from Paul. Both sides agree that the ability to work is good.

They both affirm the core of "the Protestant Work Ethic." And that, in my opinion, is one of the best things about this country—a reason to unite in rejoicing.... Just imagine where we would all be if we still believed that it was immoral to work..... Isn't it great that we live in such a wonderful country? All glory and thanks be to God.

Amen.