

## Working On That Unfinished Project

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

James 5:4

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See the man heading for his garage workshop. He has been going there regularly for a couple of years now. Two or three times a week. Goes into the workshop, stays for an hour or three, comes back out, dusting off his hands. What's he doing? Oh, that's easy: he's got a grand project in the works. Chips away at it, a little bit each week. One day he will show it to the family with a flourish. But it keeps him going for now. He just enjoys working on that unfinished project. His wife, too, has a project of her own. No, not sewing. For some folks that's fine, but she's into cartography. She is making her own detailed map of the coastline. Been chipping away at it for a couple of years now. Looks like maybe two or three years of work left before it's finished. She has to consult books, traipse over the countryside, feel the surf and sand personally. When they are at it, they are just absorbed in their projects. Work can be like that, you know. Creating something totally new.

Well, look at us. Most of us work, too. Many of us even get paid for our work. Early in my ministry, when I was getting to know the folks of my new church, I made the mistake of saying to a woman, "And do you work?" Oh, my. Talk about fools rushing in where angels fear to tread! She unloaded on me: "Yes I do, pastor! Every day, all day long. Laundry, cleaning, vacuuming, dishes, meals, taxi driver for my kids, paying bills, letters . . . You bet I work!" Okay, lesson learned. Now I say – to *both* men and women – "do you work *outside the home*?" Yes, most of us work. Some of us get paid. These days, though, "work" has taken on a whole new set of meanings. In the past few years, gainful employment has become something ever more precarious. The pandemic crushed the nation with unemployment when everything shut down. But now more people are working than ever before. And unemployment numbers are the lowest they've been in forty years! But some have to work two jobs, *plus* drive for Uber, just to keep a roof over their head, the rents have skyrocketed so high. And some of those who thought they had security for their retirement years – social and otherwise – are now facing the challenge of having to seek work again, just to keep food on the table and roof over their head. Walmarts employ an increasing percentage of folks with gray hair greeting you at the door. Labor Day 2022 still brings into the room a host of troubles, worries, and even some new vocabulary: "quiet quitting." Many of us get paid – but all of us seem to be paying the price of a deep anxiety. Look at us: those who work, and those who would dearly love to.

Now peer inside. Take a look into the souls of the masses who march off to their daily work. Or work from home. What's going on deep down? Oh, true, the anxiety and guilt are still there. But look deeper. Some absolutely *love* their work, true enough. And if you are in that group, blessed are you. Others, though, feel trapped. You are the wrong age, you don't have enough education, you were born on the wrong side of the tracks, they don't like your gender identity — you will never advance. Not that you're not trying. The *system* is stacked against you. The author of one study found that applicants with "white"-sounding names (Emily Walsh, Brendan Baker) were half-again more likely to get called for an initial interview than applicants with

African-American-sounding names (Lakisha Washington, Jamal Jones).(1) Genial faces smile as they shut the door in your face. Or they just never call you back. Others find themselves stuck in a dead-end job, boring them to death. My boss leaves Dilbert's boss in the dust, I have to make compromises that I *know* are wrong, just to keep employed, and now they've started mandatory overtime. You see your company squeezing every last drop of "efficiency" out of their employees, you see other companies holding back paying the full wages that were honestly earned — for as much as 40% of workers, according to a recent report!(2) — and you see the incredible pressure put on everybody. Hourly workers? Produce more with less! Middle-managers? Keep those production numbers up, and the grumblng down. Senior executives? Increase that profit-margin for the shareholders. The employment mill is grinding *everyone* into pulp. Yes, peer inside too many workers, and you will see souls crushed flat. Zombies just marking time.

Hear the word from God: "Let My people go!" No, we're not talking termination of employment. No, we're talking *freedom!* Cruel taskmaster Pharaoh: let my people go! Soul-crushing workplace: let my people go! Hear the Word in Deuteronomy, straight from the mouth of God: "You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt" (24:14-15). Let My people go! Treat them with *justice!* In the New Testament, the book of James echoes the sentiment, as we heard a moment ago. Let My people go! Treat them with *justice!* Work is a good thing – exercises our God-given creativity – but soul-crushing exploitation is against the Divine labor policy. Mistreat any human being made in the image of God, and God takes it personally. Won't put up with it. Treat workers fairly.

Truth is, look all you want, but nowhere in the Bible will you find a command to work! Just not there. Oh, the first human was handed gardening gloves (Genesis 2: 15), but not *commanded* to work. Oh, true, laboring by the sweat of his brow was dished out as punishment for breaking the rules (3:19). And, yes, Paul did write to the Thessalonians, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). But he was addressing a specific situation, talking about lazy ministers who wanted to sponge off of the Thessalonian church. But a commandment from God, "you shall work"? You just won't find it. Sorry about that. Oh, okay, today's scripture does admit, "you're going to work." But what you *will* find, on the other hand, is a clear command: "You will *rest.*" As in, take one day out of every seven, for the pause that refreshes. As if God sensed that Israel might try to produce a nation of workaholics. So God didn't command them to *work*, but rather to *stop* working. Every gender, old, young, citizen and immigrant alike. Every last blessed soul of them. Even the animals, for heaven's sake! "Rest!" said God. "Recuperate!" And whenever God speaks with that tone of voice, we are wise to listen.

Rest? Why in the world would God utter a divine command to *rest*, of all things? Why? Oh, that's easy: by "remembering the Sabbath," God gives us space to remember who we are. To re-collect our selves. Our *true* selves. We are *not* machines. Remember, asked God, your body-wrecking, soul-killing slavery in Egypt? We are *not* just cheap labor used to get Pharaoh's job done and then tossed away like a crumpled Dixie Cup. We are beings created in the image of God. Beloved children of God's heart. *Co-laborers* in the activity of Divine Creation. We are creatures powered by mighty dreams, destined by our Creator to share in the joy of re-creating our world. We are human beings created by God to love and laugh and live together in peace. We are gifts to each other, just waiting to be unwrapped. We are singers in God's chorus of praise. We are even handed

the joy of bringing God’s incredible love to every last crushed soul on the planet. Take a time-out, says God, to remember who you are. Stand back and inspect the unfinished project called “you.” Stop and re-connect with the only true source of your power. Re-orient your inner compass. Redirect your life toward My way. Refill your depleted energies. Recharge your batteries. Let the fresh breeze of My Spirit fill the drooping sails of your life. Know that you are *not* machines, to be used up and dumped. Remember who you really are! Do not let them grind you down! Let that seventh day infect the other six with its message of hope.(3) Stop. Listen. Rest. Renew. Get reacquainted with the *true* you. Tap the hidden streams of holy power. “Let My people go!” says God. So that *all* of us can re-learn: we were made for *more*.

And here’s the secret that lies at the heart of all Creation, friends. North, south, east, west: here it is. The best part of all is: we can *share* this simple gift with anyone we meet. We can pass along this good news to *everyone!* I knew a man who works a dull assembly-line job, adding items to kits bound for surgery. He would pray over every single packet that passed his station. Bless whoever uses this, he prayed. The patient. The surgeon. The nurses. The power of his blessing spread across the world, package by package. Now, what if . . . what if he discovered the secret that God has tucked into *every* job? What if our true job is to create something new in this world? What if our true job is to toss God’s blessing into our workaday world that crushes souls? Think, now. How many hands have had a part in creating that shirt you are wearing? Hands that grew the cotton, harvested it, ginned it, spun it into thread, dyed it, wove it into cloth, sewed that cloth together into garments, inspected it, packed it, shipped it, drove the truck, unloaded the crates, put it out on the store display, sold it to you. . . . Bless them *all*. They were made for *more*. Every crushed soul of them. All the way down the line. Give them safe working conditions, fair wages. Because they were made for *more*. Every blessed crushed soul. Bless them with rest. Bless them with recovery. Bless all those searching for jobs with meaningful work. Bless them with hope. Bless them into new creatures – blessed human beings that in turn can bless others with God’s message of life. And somewhere along the way, our prayers will turn into action – to change their working conditions. Picture it: like the recent rains, blessing showering down from God, passing through our hands, to uplift, renew, remake crushed souls. Blessings of prayers. And blessings of direct action. That, friends and neighbors, is *our* best work. That is God’s gift to us: God’s unfinished project of redeeming this world. Every last crushed soul. You were made for *more!*

So step into your workshop, ready to hammer together something new. Take a trek through human living to map the cartography of God’s loving grace. Take a time-out, to stop, renew, refresh, refill. Remember God’s gift: you were made for *more*. And then go ahead: take up your special role in God’s unfinished project. At work. At home. In the grocery store line. Anywhere. Tell everybody you meet: you were made for *more*. Amen.

### Notes

(1) “Racial Bias in Hiring: Are Emily and Brendan More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal?” by Marianne Bertrand, *Capital Ideas: Research Highlights from the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business* 4/4 (Spring 2003); accessed online on 8/30/22 at <https://www.chicagobooth.edu/review/racial-bias-hiring>.

(2) “Fact Sheet: Wage Theft Prevention and Wage Recovery Act of 2022,” accessed online on 8/30/22 at [https://edlabor.house.gov/imo/media/doc/2022-05-18 Wage Theft Prevention and Wage Recovery Act Fact Sheet.pdf](https://edlabor.house.gov/imo/media/doc/2022-05-18%20Wage%20Theft%20Prevention%20and%20Wage%20Recovery%20Act%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf)

(3) Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, (Boston: Shambhala, 2003), 71.