

"ALL YE THAT LABOR"
September 2, 1990

TEXT: Matthew 11:28-30 "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

In this day of big-payoff lotteries, every now and then we hear about a meat salesman or a widget inspector who has won a multi-million dollar prize. And people seem genuinely surprised to learn that the winner is going to keep right on working. We hear a chorus of voices, saying, "If I'd won all that money, I wouldn't work. I'd retire." It seems there are many people like that farmer in this morning's scripture. They have only two interests in life: making money and having a good time. Once the first concern has been met, they are prepared to spend the rest of their lives taking care of the other.

For them, labor is just a kind of drudgery, a necessary evil. They would agree with John Mason Brown's assessment that "Most people spend most of their days doing what they do not want to do in order to earn the right, at times, to do what they want to do." They see Labor Day, not as the celebration of a great and wonderful gift, but only as an excuse for one more paid holiday.

But Christianity approaches the subject of labor from a very different perspective. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, St. Paul reminds us that we are "fellow-workers for God." That God, in His infinite love and grace, has allowed us to help in the work of creation. And if that is true, then Labor Day is not just one last fling before the weather turns bad. It is a chance to celebrate the sacramental nature of that which fills such a large part of our waking hours.

Before I go any further, however, let me hasten to say I do not for one minute believe that sentimental garbage most of us have read to the effect that hard work is ennobling, and that the harder the work, the more ennobling it is. Let us admit that, under the wrong conditions, work can sometimes be brutal and dehumanizing.

Look, for example, at Jean Francois Millet's The Man with the Hoe. See there, as in so many of Millet's paintings, the terrible toll that unmitigated and unrewarding labor can exact. Or listen, if you will, to Edward Markham's poem of the same name:

"Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground.
The emptiness of ages in his face.
And on his back the burden of the world."

Only a fool, or the most naive romantic, would talk about the nobility of that kind of labor. And only the most calloused could look upon it in developing nations or in places like Appalachia and not feel a Christian urge to help those burdened by it.

But most of us are luckier than that. All kinds of labor-saving devices have spared us the brutality so apparent in Millet's painting and in Markham's poem. Yet millions of working men and women, whether housewives or corporation presidents still find their labor unrewarding and even degrading. The reason is not hard to find.

Over a century ago, the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, wrote, "To crush, to annihilate a man utterly, to inflict on him the most terrible of punishments so that the most ferocious murderer would shudder at it and dread it beforehand, one need only give him work of an absolutely, completely useless and irrational character."

Under the conditions of mass production, mass transportation, mass education, and mass everything else, many workers seem to experience labor as just that: mindless and irrational. Students do not understand why they have to take certain courses. Workers too often do not know why they are doing what they do. Government regulations create a kind of Alice in Wonderland quality about business, and even ministers often wonder if they are really doing any good. The resulting stress, frustration, and unhappiness can be incredibly costly, both economically and psychologically.

Others, however, are luckier still. They are not only spared the more brutal physical labor, but they also know why they are doing what they do. They are satisfied with their work --at least for a while-- because it makes sense to them. They have established certain goals, whether to become a doctor, or to provide for their families, or to set aside money for a happy retirement, and they see their daily activities as steps toward achieving those goals.

They are happy --more or less-- until one day they begin to question their objectives. Viktor Frankl tells us that the ultimate human drive is the search for meaning. And, for many, that means some kind of -ultimate- meaning. Sooner or later, they begin to wonder, "What difference does it make if I turn out more and more automobiles, or better and better lipsticks? What difference does it make if I teach another generation of students the difference between a participle and a gerund? What difference does it make if I have two televisions instead of one, or if I retire at sixty-two instead of sixty-five? Does that

give any real meaning to what I do, to what I have to put up with?" For many, the answer is, "No!" And they drown their questions --and frustrations-- in alcohol or tranquilizers, in more and more work, or in frantic recreation.

The only values that are ultimately satisfying are ultimate values. That is why it is liberating to hear Jesus say, "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Not the kind of rest that comes from not working, but the kind that comes from working in a truly noble cause.

Walter Courtenay writes: "God gave man work, not to burden him, but to bless him, and useful work, willingly, cheerfully, effectively done, has always been the finest expression of the human spirit." Or, in the words of Theodore Reik, "Work and love --these are the basics. Without them there is neurosis."

Everything Jesus did was for his Father's Kingdom. When he said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me . . . and you shall find rest for your souls", he was saying, "Whether you're a student or a housewife, whether you're a taxi driver or a corporate executive --let your work be a true vocation, a calling, a ministry in God's service." The Christian concept of work embodies the concept of service, the investment of oneself, one's talents, one's energies for the sake of others.

William Barclay writes, "Some of us work for ourselves, a bigger bank balance, a television set, a refrigerator, a new automobile --these are the things for which we work. Some of us go a little further and work for our families, a better chance for our sons and daughters, a better start in life for them, a better job than we have --these are the things for which we work.

"But there are so few, so very few who work for all, who have the spirit of service which sees beyond the boundaries of self and selfish interest. The social and economic millennium will come when master and man work, not for self, but for God and for all.

That is the easy yoke, the light burden --living, working, serving, not for the sake of the work itself, nor for what we can do with the money we earn, but for the sake of God's Kingdom. If we can do what we can, with what we have, wherever we are, what we do can be truly a sacrament, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

In that spirit, let our lives be living expressions of these words, spoken some years ago by Thomas Osborne Davis when he was inaugurated as president of Rotary International:

"Now I get me up to work,
I pray the Lord I may not shirk,
And if I die before tonight,
I pray my work will be all right."