



Bethany Jenkins ([00:00](#)):

In other words, our faith informs how we approach our work itself, not merely how we approach our neighbor. Through our work, and by offering it by faith to God, we can love and glorify God himself.

Speaker 2 ([00:17](#)):

You're listening to the Faith & Work podcast where we explore what it means to serve God, neighbor, and society through our daily work.

Dustin Moody ([00:27](#)):

Hello, and thanks for listening to the Faith & Work podcast. I'm Dustin Moody, Director of Communications at Denver Institute for Faith & Work and our guest today is Bethany Jenkins.

Bethany joined us last fall for our annual event, Women, Work & Calling, and her talk focused on a biblical vision for women's influence and explored the role of resilience and leadership. And while some of you may be thinking that Bethany's talk is only useful for women, she actually presents one of the clearest, most compelling frameworks for thinking about faith and work that we featured here on the Faith & Work podcast. So I'm excited to share this episode with you.

Bethany serves as the Vice President of Media at The Veritas Forum, a movement that helps students and faculty at the world's top universities explore life's hardest questions through conversations that place historic Christian faith in dialogue with other beliefs. In today's podcast, Bethany talks about two principles that guide our work as Christians. That work is a way to love our neighbors and that work is a way to worship God.

As you listen, consider how these principles might impact your own work. Whatever form that may take right now. We're grateful for Bethany's contributions to building a theology around Faith & Work, and we hope you enjoy this podcast.

Bethany Jenkins ([01:37](#)):

Four years ago, I was sitting across from a new friend at a coffee shop. This was back when we used to meet in person, indoors, in public spaces while drinking coffee and not wearing masks, but I digress. Anyway, she was a new friend and we were doing what new friends do. We were asking each other questions and getting to know each other. "Where did you grow up? Where did you go to college? What's your Enneagram number?" I'm just kidding. This was four years ago, nobody talked about that then. And of course, "Where do you work? What do you do?"

For most of my career I loved answering that question. I've worked at some incredible places with some incredible people and working on some great projects too. But at that moment, on that day, I blurted out the only honest thing that I could say, "I could take time to tell you what I do, but I'm not sure you'd get a good idea of who I am. Because I don't really like my job right now to be honest."

I'm sure she was thinking, "Oh boy, I better buckle up. I was trying to be polite when I asked that question and I don't want to deal with this girl's existential career crisis." But thankfully we're still friends and that interaction never really left me.

In New York City, where I lived at the time, saying that you don't love your job is tantamount to heresy. You are what you do in New York. You don't move to the City to get married or to have kids or to settle down, you move there to work, to be successful. So when I whispered my reply to her in that crowded coffee shop, I felt ashamed and embarrassed to admit such a disconnect between my job and my identity.

So, over the course of my career as I've tried to integrate my faith in my work, I've come to realize that I need a theology that works not only when I love my job and feel called to it, whatever that means, but also a theology that works when I feel stuck and I don't love where I'm working or what I'm doing or wish I could change things. This is what I want to talk with you about today. According to job satisfaction surveys, although 55% of American workers feel satisfied in their jobs, only 20% feel enthusiastic about them. One third think they're at the end of their career. It's a dead end. And 21% of you want to change your jobs. And that was pre-pandemic. That was January.

Interestingly, job satisfaction rates have ticked up slightly since the pandemic. Some think it's because we're not commuting or because in a world where 21 million people are unemployed, we are more thankful to have our jobs, even if we hated them. However, the pandemic is making our jobs more challenging. Whether it's because we're working and homeschooling, or having issues with connectivity. Or worrying about whether we'll keep our jobs because of the recession, or we're missing the social bonds that happen with colleagues. And there's evidence that COVID's new work from home culture has hit women particularly hard in terms of job losses, increased care responsibilities at home and heavy representation among low wage workers on the front lines. It's a lot of women who are the nurses and the doctors and the delivery people.

Plus, of course, who are the obvious missing voices in the new job satisfaction surveys that have ticked up during COVID? The 21 million who are unemployed. They're not answering these surveys. So I'm not sure which category you find yourself in. Maybe you're enthusiastic about your job and you came today to think vibrantly and theologically about it. Or maybe you're not sure how you feel about your job, so you came hoping that you'd better understand God's purpose for work. Or maybe you're not working, you're unemployed or you're retired and you're wondering if God has a purpose to this time. Or maybe you're like me four years ago, wondering why you're staying in a job that you don't love and wondering how to make something of it, or if that's even possible.

My hope today is that you will gain a theological framework that is resilient to embrace a variety of contexts. Whether you love or loath your job, or whether you fall somewhere in the middle, or even if you're not on that scale at all.

To gain this resilient framework, I want to turn our attention to a very old text, 2,000 years old, Paul's two letters to the church in Thessalonica. He calls them First Thessalonians and Second Thessalonians. Now, you may not be familiar with the Scriptures. So, these are in the New Testament, right after the gospels you have all of Paul's letters. They are conveniently organized by length and these two are pretty short, so they're a little bit towards the back.

Now, this is the time where I'm going to give you a little bit of historical context so if you like history, feel free to lean in. And if you hate it, now's the time to go get a cup of coffee.

During the Roman Empire, so we're talking first century right after Jesus lived, the city of Thessalonica was the capital of the province of Macedonia. It was an important city because it was a seaport located along two major trade routes. A north-south route that connected the river valleys of the Balkans to the sea. And an east-west route, known as the Via Egnatia or the Ignatian Way, that connected the eastern provinces and their cities, which you may have heard of like Constantinople or Philippi, they connected those to Italy.

Given its location, as you may guess, Thessalonica was economically important. It drew its citizens from all over the Roman Empire and as a result it was a cosmopolitan city with a thriving cultural center. Not only did this attract philosophers like Lucian, the great Roman satirist, but it also attracted the Apostle Paul, who made Thessalonica a stop along his so-called second missionary journey in about AD 50. Which we can read about in another book of the Bible called Acts.

In the Book of Acts we read that Paul, along with two of his friends, Silas and Timothy, went to Thessalonica and preached the gospel at a synagogue there. They reasoned from the Scriptures that Jesus was the promised Messiah. In response, the Book of Acts tells us that several people came to believe in Jesus. Some Jews, a large number of God-fearing Greeks, and a few prominent women.

Not everyone, however, was pleased with Paul and his message. Some of the Jewish leaders hired some town thugs. Acts refers to them as quote, "Some bad characters from the marketplace," which I've decided I'm going to start using in my everyday language. And they formed a mob. They sought to capture Paul and Silas, but that night the two men fled to a town nearby called Berea where they encountered more opportunities for the gospel, and of course, more obstacles.

But after Paul left the new believers in Thessalonica, he couldn't get over thinking about them. He really loved them. And when you read First and Second Thessalonians, it's very obvious the affection he had for them. In fact, sometimes I've used parts of his letters to write little note cards to my girlfriends and say how much I love them. And even reading them, it was very clear he wanted to be with them face-to-face.

It's probably a great COVID letter for him to write, because there's so many times we wish we could be together and we can't. For him, it was logistics and persecution. For us, it's sickness.

But these two little verses, I think, kind of encapsulate a little bit his affection for them. And I wanted to share them with you so you could understand, because a critique's about to come, I want you to understand how much he actually loves them.

And he says in Second Thessalonians, he opens the letter saying, "We always give thanks to God for you because your faith is growing abundantly and your love for each other is increasing. We boast about you when we visit other churches for your steadfastness and faith despite the persecutions and afflictions you are facing." So he's going bragging about them. It's kind of like a mom with kids, like bragging about their kids. This guy loves this church.

Now, here what's interesting. We actually don't know why Paul decided to write these letters. He's gone, he's away, he sends Timothy back to deliver the letters. And we're not sure why. We do know that these are young believers who are new to the faith and they are trying to live faithful Christian lives in a pretty secular environment. Which is kind of why I chose the letter, because it's pretty similar to our context now.

One reason though we do know he wrote, because it's in the letters, is because he wanted to encourage them to work. There was a problem with idleness in the church. There were some members who could have worked, but they chose not to. In fact, Paul mentions idleness in both of the letters. I'm just going to read them to you, the relevant part anyway.

In the first he writes, "Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody." The only caveat there is that my tone, when I said, "Mind your own business," may have sounded like my mom, because that's what I heard growing up so set that aside.

In the second letter he reiterates this point and goes even further, showing how he himself along with his two coworkers modeled this type of a life of work, not idleness.

He writes, "Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us.

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us. We were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work, should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters do not be weary in doing what is right."

Scholars aren't quite sure why the church struggled with idleness. Many believe that some of the Thessalonians had stopped working because they thought the End Times were near. They may have felt that they were already living in God's Kingdom or that Jesus was going to return at any minute. And so, for them there was no need to work. Life is over. We're about to be done. Why work?

Others have suggested a more spiritual reason for the idleness. People had given up their day jobs to preach the gospel. After all, before his ascension to heaven, Jesus gave them the great commission, make disciples of all nations. Isn't this work worth giving up your daily work to do? What could be more important than evangelism?

A third view sees the problem as more socioeconomic than theological. The church seemed to have a lot of manual workers who were unemployed, whether through laziness, persecution, or an economic downturn in their community. And some of these members could have found work, but they chose not to. Instead, knowing that Jesus taught Christian charity, they took advantage of that command and enjoyed being dependent on others more than they enjoyed working.

We may not know the reason for their idleness, but each of these three views shares one common but false supposition. And that is that Christ coming into the world radically diminished the value of everyday work. People we're using some aspect of Christ teaching, whether it was his Second Coming, so they didn't need to work; or his great commission, so they valued evangelistic work more than everyday work; or his command to radically share with the community, so they took advantage of it. They were using all of these reasons to justify their idleness. But Paul would have none of it. He says that God expects Christians who can work to work. They were to be industrious. And he says to quote, "Work with their hands." This working with your hands, by the way, was super counter-cultural. The Greco-Roman world had a negative view of manual labor. It was for the unconnected, the uneducated, the poor. It was not intellectual. It was very mundane. And the work situations weren't that great.

Yet Paul says that even that type of work is not beneath Christians. In fact, it's honorable. For Paul himself, even though he would've been the evangelist among evangelists, if that was a higher calling. And he was educated as a scholar and a religious leader, even he when he was with them, he worked with his hands as a traveling missionary.

So instead, he gives them two motivational principles to get back to work. And those are the two principles I want to talk about with you today. One, is that work is an expression where we love our neighbor. And two, is work is an expression where we can worship God.

Jeff Haanen ([15:59](#)):

Hi, this is Jeff Haanen, the founder of Denver Institute for Faith & Work. Thanks for listening to the Faith & Work podcast, and for letting me interrupt you briefly to share just a request. I want to ask you to consider becoming a financial contributor to Denver Institute. Each day thousands of people listen to our podcasts, engage in our short courses, and grow spiritually as a result of generous donors like you.

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Thanks again for your generosity towards God's people and toward the mission of Denver Institute. And now back to the Faith & Work podcast.

Bethany Jenkins ([17:04](#)):

First, work is a form of neighbor love. Love and respect are two essential virtues for Christians and living off the charity of others unnecessarily is not only unloving and disrespectful to our brothers and sisters, because it takes advantage of their generosity and charity, but it's also unloving to our unbelieving neighbors who see us taking advantage of one another. This is what Paul means when he says in the first letter to work, quote, "So that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one."

Two quick side notes. One, work in God's economy does not always mean paid work. When God introduces the idea of work to Adam and Eve in the garden, they don't talk about a paycheck. Their version of being fruitful and multiplying and filling and subduing the earth, is cooking, cleaning, repairing, building, raising kids and thousands of other unpaid activities. Any work that meets the needs of others is work whether or not it receives remuneration.

Second side note. There are times when we are unable to work and we must rely on others. And Paul assumes that there are legitimate charitable cases when he tells the generous members of the church at the end of that second passage I read you to not grow weary of doing good. He fears that these generous and more wealthy members may have felt exploited and disillusioned by how the idle had taken advantage of their charity. But he doesn't want them to be bitter. He wants them to be generous to those who are truly needy. That is, those who are willing to work, but for whatever reason can't. So he tells them, "Don't grow weary of doing good. Take care of those in your midst who sincerely cannot work." So those are the two side notes.

Now back to the main point. Work is a neighbor love. German theologian, Martin Luther, in the early 1500s really was the champion of this idea in our modern era. Modern, you know, 500 years ago or so. He was born into a church culture that celebrated religious work above all else.

In the late middle ages only priests and other church workers had callings and vocations. They were part of the spiritual estate and everyone else from farmers to lawyers to kings had necessary but worldly occupations. The rise of monastic spirituality, which called religious workers out of the everyday world and into the desert or monastery, only reinforced this perspective. [inaudible 00:19:48] was second-class. Life was divided into the sacred and the secular, but this was not lost on Luther.

Luther wanted to connect your everyday faith and your everyday life. "All of us," he reasoned, "are priests, no matter how ordinary our days are." And he writes this, "It is pure fiction that the pope, bishops, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate, while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate. This is a bit indeed, a bit of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and for this reason all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. We are consecrated priests by baptism. As Saint Peter says, 'You are a royal priesthood in a priestly realm.' And Revelation says, 'Thou hast made us to be kings and priests by thy blood.'"

The idea of vocation then included religious work, as well as non-religious work, domestic duties, civic engagement, ordinary employment. What made work Christian wasn't the type of work being done, but the faith of the one doing it.

Luther writes, "The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ one wit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, and all works are measured before God by faith alone."

Such faith, Luther believed, was evidenced by our everyday work. He was the guy who posted the Ninety-five Theses to the doors of the church in Wittenberg. And in one of his theses I love, it's number 44. And he says, "Love grows by works of love." For him, work was one of the best ways to love one's neighbor. Love grows by works of love.

Tim Keller summarizes it when he says, "When we work, we are, as those in the Lutheran tradition often put it, 'the fingers of God,' the agents of his providential love for others." This understanding elevates the purpose of work from making a living to loving our neighbor.

Thus Luther, Paul, and Tim Keller are all in agreement. Our everyday work, even if it is monotonous or manual or disrespected by the dominant culture is a way to love our neighbors. Four years ago when I was sitting across that table from my new friend this was the theology that I needed. I didn't like my job. It felt monotonous and my clients were needy. And I wasn't that inspired by the organizational vision. The job didn't feel like a calling or a vocation or the best use of my talents.

Honestly, even though I'm a Type A New Yorker who normally loves to work. There were days when I wanted to stay home and be idle. Stay home and watch Netflix, because I didn't want to go to work. I was tempted very much to be like those First Thessalonians, but when I encountered this theology, I was working at that job. I'd show up and remind myself that this job, even if I didn't feel like it was fulfilling, was in fact serving my neighbors.

Clients would come into my office and they would be needy, but I had the tools to help them. And they would leave my office with a plan of action. Sometimes they would come in fearful about the future, but I was able to counsel them and coach them. I edited their writing when they asked. I connected them to people that could help them. My work, even if I didn't love it, was a way that I was loving my neighbors. So that's the first way that work can be a way of neighborly love.

Number two, work can also be an expression of worship to God. In Genesis 2, we read that, "The Lord put humanity in the garden to work it and keep it." Theologians often call this the creation mandate. One of Paul's points to the Thessalonians is that the creation mandate is still in effect. That the work of Christ did not eliminate or supersede humanity's original work. Paul may have had this Genesis passage in his mind when he chose to use the Greek word [foreign language 00:24:23], when he refers to the idlers in Thessalonica. It means disorder. Suggesting that their behavior is disorderly because it is disregarding the work mandate in Genesis.

But in fact, in his first letter to the Thessalonians, his exhortations for the idle to work come in the part of the letter where he's calling all members of the church, not just the idle, to live lives that are pleasing to God. And this is the point of all Christian life. Live lives that are pleasing to God. And therefore, as an extension of that, he says, "Let's get to work."

Because of this context and other passages like it throughout the New and Old Testament, John Calvin extended Luther's teaching, "Not only is work a way to love our neighbor, it is also a means to love and glorify God." Every Christian has a calling to create and bring forth the wonders of the created order.

Tim Keller again explains, "Yes, we must love our neighbor, but Christianity gives us very specific teachings about human nature and what makes human beings flourish. We must ensure that our work is done in line with those understandings. Faithful work then is to operate out of a Christian worldview." In other words, our faith informs how we approach our work itself, not merely how we approach our neighbor. Through our work and by offering it by faith to God, we can love and glorify God Himself.

Practicing law, for example, isn't just a way to love one's neighbor though it certainly can do that. It's also a way to advance biblical justice in our communities. Put another way, God doesn't just care about lawyers. He also cares about just laws. There is perhaps no one who captures this idea, I think, more vibrantly than Dorothy Sayers, who is a contemporary of C.S. Lewis. In her short essay called, *Why Work*, which you can Google she writes, "Work is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or it should be, the full expression of the worker's faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God. He must be able to serve God in his work, and the work itself must be accepted and respected as the medium of divine creation."

This is a big calling. It was not something I could have grasped four years ago when I was not happy in my job. But for me, now, I work in a job I currently enjoy very much. And I think about two aspects where my Christian worldview makes a difference, both in my industry, media and in my role as a manager of a team. Rather than giving you examples and pretending like I have everything figured out, which I don't. I assure you. I'm going to share with you some of the questions that I ask myself about my work when I think about trying to apply a Christian worldview to the work I do every day.

On the media side, I ask questions like, "Are we being honest in what we produce?" For God calls Christians to honesty even if the media today isn't known for honesty. "Are we creating content that serves and delights our audience?" Not merely it tries to gain eyeballs. "Are we helping our community to engage their everyday worlds with thoughtfulness, not fear? Am I measuring the metrics that matter? Is our work excellent?"

On the manager side, I ask questions like, "Am I empowering and equipping members of my team to excel in their jobs? What is my role in their full career paths and who God is making them to be?" I'm just this pit stop on the journey. They've got a whole calling before the Lord. "How am I helping them accomplish that? Are we meeting our metrics of success in a way that evidence is that I am helping to steward their gifts to their fullest potential and our fullest potential as a team without overburdening them with overwork? When a member of my team makes a mistake is my first instinct to assume the best of them, or is it to assume the worst of them?"

I'm not sure what questions you need to ask about your industry, but my guess is that throughout the day today, you'll hear from lots of women who are trying to think Christianly about their work. What does it mean to think Christianly about our work? At minimum, this means that we need to know what a Christian worldview is. And for that, I highly recommend a book called, *Creation Regained*, by Al Wolters. Or I'm sure, Joanna, at the Denver Institute for Faith & Work, can point you to some great resources.

If you want to go further into delving into how the Christian worldview affects your work, you may want to think about your particular industry. Its strengths and pitfalls, its temptations and how the Christian story shapes, corrects, and even redeems it. For that, talk with your friends today as we encounter content or get a group of friends in your same vocation together and begin talking about your work and how a Christian worldview might shape it.

So those are my two points. Work is a means of neighbor love and work can be a way to worship God. But, I want to pause for a second because some people pit these ideas against each other. In fact, Luther did, he would not have agreed with Calvin. They both championed the dignity of all work and they denied distinctions between the sacred and the secular. They both clung to the priesthood of all believers, celebrating ordinary work done by all people. But Luther focused on work as a means of neighbor love and Calvin focused on works as a means of loving and glorifying God. One of my friends,

he's a theologian, helped me see the distinction between the two and why Luther would have found such conflict with them. This is what he told me.

He said, "Luther strongly resisted any direct connection between our work and God, fearing that it would be works-based righteousness. God put a calling on our works, Luther reasoned, because He wants us to serve our neighbors, not because He wants us to serve Him. As he once said, 'God doesn't need your good works, but your neighbor does.' And he meant it. But Calvin insisted our daily work must love and serve and glorify God Himself directly, in addition to loving our neighbors."

Although that is a sharp point of contrast between the two, their ideas are not that opposed to each other. I like to think of them as tools in a toolkit. Useful in different contexts and perhaps different times in our lives. That's why on a talk on a day of resilience, I like to think about tools and things we can use throughout our lives in different contexts.

In places where work is more static, where people stay in their jobs for many years or do the exact same activity day after day. Sometimes people call that blue collar work. The Lutheran idea of work as a means of neighbor love can be life-sustaining. Indeed, it encourages all of us to be faithful in the little things that are part of our everyday jobs. In fact, people in different vocational [inaudible 00:31:57] too, might find joy in Luther's idea of work. For me, when I didn't love my job it was his theology, not Calvin's high and mighty idea of calling and vocation that sustained me. Even on days when I felt most disconnected from the larger affect of my work. I knew every time I talked to someone that I was loving my neighbors and clients.

Another vocational [inaudible 00:32:23] that might benefit from the teaching of Luther is actually for people young in their careers. Cal Newport is a professor at Georgetown. He's done a lot of research on job satisfaction. One of his big questions is, "What makes someone love their job?" Interestingly, he's found that loving your job is actually not about pursuing your passion because he says, "Passion is a product, an end product, not a prerequisite for finding work you love." So, how do you find you love? He says there are three key factors. One, you're competent at it. You know how to do the job. Two, you have control over it. You have autonomy over the work you're doing. Three, you're connected to it. You like the people you work with and you like the mission you're on.

When you're young in your career, you usually don't have the first two. You don't have control or competence. Those come with time. You might have connectedness. You might like the people you work with, hopefully. But it's really hard when you're young in your career to understand how a Christian worldview informs my industry because you're at the beginning. It'll come, but it won't come as immediately as neighbor love. Even when you're 22 and you may not understand the full meaning of your industry, you can turn to your colleague, you can turn to your boss, you can turn to a younger intern and say, "I may not understand everything, but I know I can love you." And that's a means of neighbor love.

On the other hand, Calvin's idea of work is worship is super helpful where work is more dynamic. Where people change jobs and pursue various expressions of calling. Often so-called white collar work.

Calvin's idea of work can help those who wonder how their faith affects their work in acting, in advertising, in mining, and writing. Calling Christians in such workplaces to search the Scriptures for applicable principles is a necessary part of discipleship and sanctification.

So in conclusion, we look at Paul's letters to the church in Thessalonica. We're not looking mainly at their issue, idleness. I mean, who attends a conference about women, work, and faith on a Saturday and struggles with idleness? Likely none of you. But we're looking at the motivations that Paul gives to the Thessalonians to get to work. He wants them to love their neighbor and to glorify God. He



doesn't mention it's about a paycheck. He doesn't mention it's about self-identity. It's about the two first great commandments that Jesus told us, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart," and, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That's what work's about.

Speaker 2 ([35:05](#)):

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