

Enjoying the Work of Our Hands, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 25071118
Isaiah 65:17-25 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
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In 1985, twenty-two years ago, Sue, Emily, Maggie and I began building a log cabin on Owasco Lake, one of central New York's "Finger Lakes." After contracting for the foundation and concrete block basement, we did all of the rest of the work ourselves. Emily and Maggie learned to drill, hammer spikes, caulk, and weatherstrip. With the help of a lot of friends, neighbors, and church members, we closed the last window and door in on Columbus Day weekend that first year. In the intervening years, we have constructed the walls, rooms, closets, ceilings, and moldings. Whenever we drive the eleven hours to the cabin, we can relax in the peace and quiet of the woods and the lake. I love to just sit on the great room couch and look at the logs, ceilings, walls. I remember cutting and fitting each log. I can sit back, kick my feet up, and enjoy the work of my hands.

It is a satisfying feeling! But as I sit back and look up and sigh, I thank God. I thank God that we were able to purchase the land, that Sue and I found the right contractors and source of logs, that my father taught me the skills and gave me the determination to accomplish a project as massive as that, and that we had friends and neighbors to help us.

Is there something like that in your life?...something upon which you can look and feel satisfied? ...some work of your hands that you can enjoy? ... a wonderful meal created for family?... a big business proposal?...eating the vegetables from a garden you cultivated, planted, watered, weeded, and harvested?... a fire fueled by logs you cut and split?... skirt or dress that you sewed together?...a painting or a music recital? It is a wonderful gift to be able to enjoy the work of our hands. Sometimes, I wonder what it would feel like if somehow we lost that log cabin--say if a fire burned it, or vandals got in and destroyed it.

There was a time when the Jewish people lost all they had worked for. Can you imagine building a home, planting a garden, and feeding sheep, building a business, and then having it all taken away from you? It happened when the Babylonians conquered Judea in 587 B.C. The possessions of the Jews were confiscated, and they were sent into exile in Babylonia. It was a time of mourning, and sadness. Who would want to do anything, after one's life's work, one's heritage were taken away? The prophet known to us as Third Isaiah, gave those exiles hope in the future. He said that God would create a new order. People would live to an old age. To live to be one hundred years of age would be no big deal. People would be able to build homes and inhabit them. They could enjoy the work of their hands in peace and tranquility.

Thanksgiving is a time to kick back and enjoy the work of our hands and to thank our creator God who is the source of all of the work of our hands-- the one who made all things possible.

Giving thanks is a natural part of the religious life. The Bible contains "Thanksgiving" or its variations one hundred sixty-one times in the Bible. David "appointed certain of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the LORD, to thank, and to praise the LORD, the God of Israel."¹ There are fifty-five references to giving thanks to God in Psalms. Jesus gave thanks when he fed crowds and when he broke bread with his Disciples at the last supper. One of the last scenes of the Bible appears in Revelation, with souls in heaven worshipping God and singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God

¹1 Chronicles 16:4

forever and ever! Amen.”² Paul’s letters are full of thankfulness to God for those who have embraced the faith.

The root of the Greek word for thanks is *Char*, which has five important derivatives: *chara*, *chairō*, *cháris*, *chárisma*, and *eucharistía*. The first is *chara*. We would translate that “joy.” When something gives us joy, it is a sure sign that we ought to give thanks. Joy itself is something for which to be thankful. Joy is a gift from God. When we don’t have joy, perhaps it is because we are not thankful for what have. A thankful person is a joyful person!

The second derivative is *chairō*. We would translate that “to rejoice”. It is interesting that it sounds exactly like the two letters Chi and Rho, the first 2 letters of Christ in Greek. *Chairō*: we rejoice when we give thanks. Rejoicing is to dance, to sing, and to say “YES!!!” That is what we do when we finish a project: we rejoice. Or when we find something that has been lost, we rejoice! When we rejoice, it is a time to be thankful!

The third derivation is *cháris*. We would translate that as “grace.” Grace is an unmerited gift from God. We are saved by God’s grace and by God’s mercy, not by something we do. It is simply given by God. Most families who call themselves Christian say “grace” before every meal. In this case, “grace” is a prayer of thanksgiving. We recognize that God is behind the potatoes, the carrots, the pizza, the pork, the yogurt, or even, yuch, liver! Grace is God’s unmerited gift. We can be thankful that God wants us always to be with God here in this life and in life after death.

The fourth derivation is *chárisma*. We would translate that as “gift.” When a person has charisma, they have a gift of personality, one that people like to be around. But, charisma can be any kind of a gift. What is your gift? Do you have a gift for leadership? A gift for tending to details? A gift for listening? A gift for teaching? How do you use that gift from God? When you discover what your gifts are, you can be thankful, and out of thanks, use them to spread God’s reign of love and salvation.

The fifth derivation is *eucharistía*. We translate this “gratitude,” or “thanksgiving.” It might sound familiar to you who have been exposed to some other Christian traditions. The communion table is called the table of eucharist. Communion is an act of thanksgiving, or gratitude. Think of it as a channel through which God’s love is demonstrated to us, and through which we can give thanks to God.

Now, with all of this thankfulness, joy and free giving, what do we do with those words in Second Thessalonians, “we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.”³

It would appear that there are some today for whom those words are the sum and substance of the whole Bible. Similar words have come from some of today’s pulpits, and they are very popular with some lawmakers who would rid this nation of the welfare system. Before we jump on that no work no eat bandwagon, I have some cautionary words. First, do not condemn our social service system, or anyone receiving assistance, until you know at least one recipient as a friend on a first name basis.

In the Mother-to-Mother program Sue directed a few years ago, the vast majority of those receiving assistance are doing so on a short term basis. Most were off of assistance within three years. Some were mothers who were abandoned by their husbands--thrown out as trash. Assistance gave them the opportunity to get a new start, and they were hard workers.

²Revelation 7:12

³2 Thessalonians 3:10

Second, do not condemn a person because of what they have been taught by their role models. Instead, become involved with such individuals and help teach them what the work ethic is. Teach them the joy that you receive in being able to kick back and enjoy the work of your hands. A few years ago, I enjoyed hearing the story of a right-wing conservative who had the courage and audacity to go into a Chicago housing project and teach kids the personal joy of gardening and selling the literal fruits of their labor.

If we are honest, we will look at our own personal history and realize how fortunate we have been to have had good hard-working role models and to have had a break from someone who offered us a job. Mr. Roemer was a lay man at a church that I served while in seminary. He complained about run down neighborhoods. "Why don't they just go out and buy a bucket of paint?" he asked. Well, how much does a bucket of paint cost? Multiply that times the number of buckets it takes to paint a house. Factor in the difficult choice between buying that paint and feeding children. Then, remember that the residents in those neighborhoods are usually paying rent. The home is owned by someone else and the renters will not be reimbursed for their efforts.

Mr. Roemer was proud of the fact that he had been working since he was nine years old when he took his little wagon to the corner grocery store and offered to deliver groceries. He was no recipient of welfare, this man, no. He worked for everything he ever had. When I asked him where he got the wagon, he said his uncle gave it to him!

We who are well-off are recipients of welfare. We are recipients of grace. Yes, let's sit back and kick up and enjoy the work of our hands, but let us also give thanks to our wonderful, kind, loving, and grace-ful God.

May this Thursday be for you a day of joy, rejoicing, grace, gifts, and thanksgiving.