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### **The Dignity, Nobility and Healthfulness of Labor**

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**Your Life Your Health**

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Without doubt, Labor Day is celebrated as an acknowledgement of “organized labor’s” contribution to the United States of America. However, to appreciate and appropriately honor the centrality of “labor” in human experience, we have to go back in human history. If you do a search of the web on the word “labor” you will find 50,400,000 entries.

Yet, the honor given to labor on this day and in our society has not always been so. In his essay, *John Calvin, The Work Ethic, and Vocation*, Allister Stone reminds us that “labor” and “work” have not always been considered to be noble. He begins his essay with a quote, “Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.” It was John Calvin, the Protestant reformer, who in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century affirmed the nobility of work.

While, in the beginning of human history work was not only necessary, it was welcomed and it was honored, “in the Greek culture work was a curse and was intended only for the lowest class of people. There was a pervasive belief that a person’s prudence, morality, and wisdom were directly proportional to the amount of leisure time that a person had. Ancient Roman built itself on the back of the Greek ideas, with an even larger slave labor component.”

In John Calvin’s theology, the “vocational idea was that ‘there would be no employment so mean and sordid...as not to appear truly respectable, and be deemed highly important in the sight of God...if we feel ‘called to laziness’...that is not what God intended.” Stone concludes his essay with the comment:

“Like a pejorative, ‘work’ is not something many revel in. Many still dread, fight, and avoid work, and count down the days until retirement from their current vocation. Instead, let us look at things the way Calvin did. Do not forget the process that has given us the freedom to pursue any vocation our hear desires. Often, the history that led up to the emancipation of the works is under-appreciated. Many are negligent in acknowledging God or thanking God for allowing them the opportunity to participate in his plan, which includes our working.”

Labor is so central to our nature and existence, we often forget how pervasive it is:

1. We begin independent existence by the “labor” of our mothers in giving birth to us. If “labor” is too brief, significant harm can come to the newborn.
2. Nature’s design is that labor is a critical part of the beginning of life. If a person, in a misguided sense of kindness, tries to eliminate the labor and struggle of the chick to break out of the egg shell by breaking open the shell for the chick, the chick dies. Labor and struggle are part of the process of transitioning from a dependent life to an independent one.
3. A story is told about a lady with a pet squirrel whom she loved. Wanting to help her pet, she would crack nuts and feed only the meat to her pet. Nature’s design was that the squirrel’s incisors continuously grow and without the labor and effort of obtaining its own food, the teeth grow until they curl back over the squirrel’s head and killed it.

The privilege and value of labor is often lost upon our consciousness until we lose it. I oppose the death penalty but we can learn something about labor from those who have been isolated on a “death row” for decades. In a social experiment, one penal system found that allowing inmates on death row the privilege of productive work with the ability to earn a small amount of money improved their behavior and their mental status.

Another unintended social experiment occurred in a mental institution which cared for the sickest patients. It was discovered that when the residents were given responsibilities – work – their behavior improved. A simple task like being required to keep their personal things picked up and orderly had a positive affect on their interaction with others and seemingly with their sense of personal value and virtue (power to change their life).

Children reared with no work are harmed. One great achievement of the labor movement was the elimination of the abuses of child labor, where children were worked for twelve hours a day under unsafe and unpleasant circumstances. But the absence of any productive work, either in the form of household duties or chores will cripple a child’s emotional and intellectual growth. I have had the pleasure of knowing a wise family who has a child with spina bifida, a congenital condition which leads to paralysis and abnormal development. I have never seen a couple love and cherish a child more than this family loses their children. However, their love demands that they require this child to be a productive part of the family. They do not allow the other children to do everything for their special child. Their goal is that this child will go to college, choose a career, work and provide for herself. Nothing could be more loving. And nothing could be more right.

In the movie, *Dave*, a story is told of a man who becomes President but whose real job is at a “temp agency” where he finds work for people who need a job. At one point he says with great passion:

“If you've ever seen the look on somebody's face the day they finally get a job, I've had some experience with this; they look like they could fly. And its not about the paycheck, it's about respect, it's about looking in the mirror and knowing that you've done something valuable with your day. And if one person could start to feel this way, and then another person, and then another person,

soon all these other problems may not seem so impossible. You don't really know how much you can do until you, stand up and decide to try.”

In my family we have a wonderful young man who has Downs Syndrome but every day he goes to work, earns his living and has a joy and delight in life that many who are corporate executives have never experienced.

As we celebrate Labor Day, let us applaud the benefits which have come to our western civilization through organized labor, but let us also celebrate the gift of labor, of work, to all of us. Let us invite work into our life and community. Let us honor those who work and let us recognize that the greatest gift we can give others is not a “living,” but a life. A “living” can come from society giving something to others for nothing, but a “life” will only come because we help them find work and as they learn to celebrate the joy and the privilege of work.

**Have you ever seen the look on somebody's face the day they finally get a job?**