

CHAPTER FIVE

The Teaching of the New Testament about Work

Work—a curse or a blessing—which is it? Here are two poems with precisely opposite ideas of work. The first is four lines of doggerel which were written by a charwoman who was very tired and who was dying:

*Don't pity me now;
Don't pity me never;
I'm going to do nothing
For ever and ever.*

The one thing in the world she wanted was to be done for ever with work. Dr Johnson, who was nothing if not honest, once said: 'We would all be idle if we could.'

But here is Rudyard Kipling's dream of what he wanted when life had ended:

*When earth's last picture is painted,
and the tubes are twisted and dried,
When the oldest colours are faded,
and the youngest critic has died,
We shall rest and faith we shall need it—
lie down for an aeon or two
Till the Master of all Good Workmen
shall put us to work anew.*

*And those that were good shall be happy:
they shall sit in a golden chair;
They shall splash at a ten-league canvas
with brushes of comets' hair.*

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*They shall find real saints to draw from,
Magdalene, Peter and Paul,
They shall work for an age at a sitting,
and never grow tired at all.*

*And only The Master shall praise us,
and only The Master shall blame;
And no one shall work for money,
and no one shall work for fame,
But each for the joy of the working,
and each in his separate star,
Shall draw the Thing as he sees It
for the God of Things as They are.*

Here are two opposite points of view. In the one case the end of life is the end of work—and thank God! In the other case the end of life is the opportunity to work as never before—and praise God! It so happens that these two points of view can both be found in the Bible, though not with equal emphasis. The conclusion of the old Genesis story is that Adam and Eve are for ever shut out of the garden, and the condemnation is: 'In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread' (Genesis 3.17-19). The idea is that, if man had not sinned, he would have lived for ever in the sun-kissed paradise with nothing to do but to enjoy the garden.

On the other hand, almost the whole Bible, apart from this story, bases its entire thought on the teaching and the assumption that man is meant to work and to work honourably and well. 'There is nothing better,' said the preacher, 'than that a man should enjoy his work' (Ecclesiastes 3.22). In the teaching of Jesus parable after parable is based on the fact that a good servant must be a good workman.

Paul was quite clear that if a man refused to work, he had no right to eat (2 Thessalonians 3.10), and it is his own claim and his boast that he supported himself with his own two hands, and took nothing for nothing from anyone (1 Thessalonians 2.9; 2 Thessalonians 3.8). And there is the astonish-

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ing case of Jesus. Jesus was no less than thirty years of age when he emerged into public life (Luke 3.23). It was as the carpenter of Nazareth that people knew him (Mark 6.2). For thirty of his thirty-three years on earth he was a village workman. There is a legend that he made the best ox-yokes in Galilee and that men beat a track to his shop to buy them. In those days they had signs over their shops as they have now, and it has been suggested that the sign on Jesus' shop door was an ox-yoke and the writing: 'My yokes fit well.' 'My yoke is easy' (Matthew 11.30)—not in the sense that it is no bother, but in the sense that shoes are easy, that they fit well. It is quite certain that, if Jesus had not done the work of the shop in Nazareth well, he would never have been given by God the work of saving the world. Jesus began by being a working man.

This was one of the basic differences between the Jewish and the Greek and Roman world. To a Jew work was essential; work was of the essence of life. The Jews had a saying that he who does not teach his son a trade teaches him to steal. A Jewish rabbi was the equivalent of a college lecturer or professor, but according to the Jewish law he must take not a penny for teaching; he must have a trade at which he worked with his hands and by which he supported himself. So there were rabbis who were tailors and shoemakers and barbers and bakers and even perfumers. Work to a Jew was life.

But the Greek and Roman civilisations were based on slavery. According to Plato, no artisan could be a citizen of the ideal state. Aristotle tells us that in Thebes no man could become a citizen until ten years after he had stopped working at a trade. Cicero lays it down that no gentleman will work for a wage; no gentleman will buy or sell either wholesale or retail. 'No workshop can have any culture about it.'

Unquestionably the Christian tradition came from the Jewish tradition. Work for the Jew and for the Christian is the making of life. Work and life are the same thing. We can begin by saying certain quite general things about work.

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i. First, our work is what we are and where we are. There is nothing commoner than for a person to wish that his work was other than that it is. The worker in industry or in a factory might wish to be a minister or a doctor, and there are times when the minister and the doctor covet enviously a job that begins at 9 a.m. and finishes at 5.30 p.m. instead of a job that goes on for twenty-four hours a day. Carlyle was one of Scotland's great thinkers and writers; his father was a stonemason and a famous builder of bridges; and Thomas Carlyle used to say that he would rather have built one of his father's bridges than written all his own books.

There was a famous Jewish rabbi called Zusya. Sometimes he used to wish that he was other than he was. And then he said very wisely: 'In the world to come they will not ask me, Why were you not Moses? They will ask, Why were you not Zusya?' A man's duty is literally to be himself.

Rita Snowden quotes a poem in one of her books; she says that it was written by a girl of nineteen years of age, but she does not name the author:

*Lord of all pots and pans and things
Since I've no time to be
A saint by doing lovely things
Or watching late with thee,
Or dreaming in the dawnlight,
Or storming heaven's gates,
Make me a saint by getting meals
And washing up the plates.*

*Thou who didst love to give men food
In room or by the sea,
Accept this service that I do—
I do it unto thee.*

So then our work is first and foremost what we are and where we are. This is not to say that no man ought to change his job, or want another job; but it is to say that the best way to a

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greater job is to do the one we have supremely well. It is the strange paradox that the man who gets the greater job is the man who is so intensely interested in what he is doing that he does not think of any other job.

ii. The New Testament is quite sure that there is no better test of a man than the way in which he works. Again and again this is the keypoint of the parables of Jesus. All that a man has to show God is his work—and that does not mean *what* he has done so much as *how* he did it.

L. P. Jacks used to tell of an old Irish navvy who worked on the construction of railways long before the days of mechanical shovels and bulldozers and excavators, in the days when all they had was a shovel and a barrow. The old navvy's spade was so well used that it shone like stainless steel when he cleaned the mud off it at night. Some one once asked him jestingly: 'Well, Paddy, what will you do when you die and when God asks you what you have to say for yourself?' 'I think', said Paddy, 'that I'll just show him my spade.' L. P. Jacks was the author of many books, and he wrote his manuscripts by hand. When he wrote he always wore an old tweed jacket, and the right cuff of the jacket was worn away with rubbing against the desk as he wrote. 'If it comes to that,' Jacks used to say, 'I think I'll show God the cuff of my jacket.'

Work is the test—not the importance of the work from the prestige point of view, but the fidelity with which it is done. It has been truly said that God does not so much need people to do extraordinary things as he needs people who do ordinary things extraordinarily well.

iii. The test of a man is work; and we can put that in another way—the test of a workman is, Does he earn his pay? Or, to put it better, does he try to earn his pay? We have in these days come perilously near to a situation in which a man is thinking, not of earning his pay, but of getting more and more pay for less and less work. If this was an ideal world, we would all be more interested in the quality of the work we

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produced than in the pay we got for it. It is hardly possible to rise to that height, except for the creative artist whose work is a thing of the spirit. But we are at a stage just now when the right to be paid is demanded, when the right to bargain for more is demanded, when the right to take action for the highest possible pay is demanded, and when the obligation to earn that pay is seldom admitted. Rudyard Kipling, a long time ago now, wrote a poem with this verse in it:

*From forge and farm and mine and bench,
Deck, altar, outpost lone,
Mill, school, battalion, counter, trench,
Rail, senate, sheepfold, throne,
Creation's cry goes up on high
From age to cheated age:
'Send us the men who do the work
For which they draw the wage.'*

iv. There is one thing which would go far to make work what it ought to be, and to cause it to be done in the spirit in which it ought to be done; and that is, if we could look at our work as a contribution owed to the community.

One of the most famous of all economic principles is the principle associated with the name of Adam Smith—the principle of the division of labour. By that principle no one tries to do everything, but each person does his own job. The baker does not try to make clothes and the tailor does not try to bake bread. The shoemaker does not try to fillet fish and the fishmonger does not try to sole shoes. Each man does his part and the whole makes up an efficient society. It is a case of each for all and all for each. This is not only good economics; it is also good Christianity. For this is the principle of the community as a body in which each part has its own part to play.

But the trouble today is that there is little or no community in life. Each section of the community is out to further its own interests, often regardless of the interest of the other parts of

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the community, and, it would seem, always regardless of the interest of the community as a whole. If men and women worked to contribute to the community instead of to extract from the community, the community would be in a much more healthy state than it is today.

It is easy—and it is unfair—to point out all the faults and to give the impression that the duty is all on one side. Just as a man has obligations which he must satisfy and responsibilities which he must fulfil, he has certain things which are due to him; and, if these things are not given to him, there is bound to be trouble—and that trouble extends far beyond its own generation, for there is such a thing as racial memory. We see racial memory at work in animals. For instance, a dog will turn round and round before he lies down to sleep, because at one time his ancestors lay down in the long grass and they had to make a comfortable hollow before they slept. So in society today we get discontents and fears and resentments which are not the result of present conditions at all, but which are the result of injustices and inhumanities which happened two or three generations ago. The trouble in society is that if we sow the wind we reap the whirlwind. It often happens that men are fighting again—quite unconsciously—the battles their fathers and their grandfathers fought—and in the present conditions quite unnecessarily. So, then, just as there are certain things due *from* a man there are also certain things due *to* a man.

The teaching of Jesus has certain implications; they are specially prominent in the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20.1-16).

i. There is first of all *the right of a man to work*. It is astonishing how recently the working man acquired any rights at all. As late as the 1890s there was no unemployment benefit and no old age pensions. Hundreds of thousands of artisans were out of work. They were sleeping six on a bench on the Embankment between Temple and Blackfriars; they huddled together

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for warmth in the arches of Blackfriars Bridge; they were sleeping by the score in Spitalfields graveyard and in the shop doors of Liverpool Street. Frank Collier tells how the Salvation Army began to investigate this problem. And on a single evening in June 1890 there were in the middle of the night 368 men sleeping out in the single mile between Westminster and Blackfriars, living through the hell of empty days on a pennyworth of bread and a pennyworth of soup per day.

When I went to my first and only parish in Renfrew in the early thirties, we were almost at once plunged into that terrible depression which hit the world in the middle thirties, and of my twenty-seven elders nineteen were unemployed. It was then that I saw men's skill rotting in idleness. It was then that I knew what Sir Henry Arthur Jones the philosopher meant when he said that the saddest words in all Shakespeare are: 'Othello's occupation's gone.' This is something which in a Christian country must never happen again. It is the racial memory of these days which produced and produces things like restrictive practices and the failure to work all out. There is the unconscious memory and the unconscious fear that these workless days might come back.

ii. There is next *the right of a man to a living wage*. Again in 1890—which, mark you, is still within the lifetime of people still alive—Richard Collier quotes an instance of a mother and two children under nine working sixteen hours a day to produce 1,000 matchboxes for a wage of 1s. 5½d. All right—that cannot happen now—but it happened—and it takes more than one generation to eradicate the memory of that.

iii. There is *the right of a man to reasonable working conditions*. This was something which eighty years ago did not enter into an employer's calculations. Richard Collier tells of how matches were made at that time to sell at a penny per dozen boxes. At that price they had to be made of yellow phosphorus, of which three grains are lethal. The workers dipped the matches in the phosphorus and the operation put them in peril of their lives. They would touch their faces. They

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would think that they had toothache. It was phosphorus attacking the jaw. 'Soon the whole side of the face turned green, then black, discharging foul-smelling pus. This was "phossy jaw"—necrosis of the bone—and the one outcome was death.' In a workshop in which phosphorus was used, if the light was put out—I quote—"in the eerie darkness, the victim's jaw, even her hands, glowed greenish-white like a spectre's, as the phosphorus rotted her while she lived"—and people were brought to see this as a sight. You cannot do that to people without leaving this racial memory which it will take generations to remove. When we remember the nineteenth century, the wonder is, not that industrial relations can be difficult, but that they are as good as they are. When people who were treated like that find themselves in a position to defend themselves and to have their demands met, no one can blame them for taking the chance. The simple fact is that it is impossible to build an industrial community on an industrial ethic which is unchristian. Our forefathers did just that, and it is our task to mend the situation—but first we must understand it.

But now we must bring the matter home. What is work to me? What place has it in my life? What ought work to be to me? What place ought it to have in my life?

It can be that my work is everything, and that for it I live. Carlyle said: 'Blessed is he who has found his work; let him ask no further blessedness.' Sir Henry Coward the musician said at the end of his career that there was no reason to thank or congratulate him on his work, because all his life he had been paid for doing the work that he would gladly have paid to be allowed to do. Paul Tournier the great doctor said that every doctor must feel that he is a collaborator with God. A man can find God and life in his work. You remember Kipling's M'Andrew, the Scots engineer down in the bowels of the ship who tended his engines and thought of God:

*From coupler-flange to spindle-guide I see thy hand, O God,
Predestination in the stride o' yon connectin' rod.*

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These and such as these find real life in their work. But that is far from being true of everyone. You remember how Robert Louis Stevenson tells in his *Inland Voyage* about the man who drove the hotel bus at Maubeuge: the man said: 'Here I am. I drive to the station—well—and then I drive back to the hotel; and so on every day all the week round. My God, is that life?' Or you remember Charles Lamb, for thirty-three long years a clerk in the East India Company offices, as he talks of

the dry drudgery of the desk's dead wood.

For long enough now Christian ethics has been piously teaching that in our everyday work we must find our joy, our pride, our self-satisfaction, our self-fulfilment. We have been comfortably quoting John Keble:

*The trivial round, the common task,
Would furnish all we ought to ask;
Room to deny ourselves; a road
To bring us, daily, nearer God.*

It is time that we stopped talking pious platitudes and took a fresh look at our philosophy of work. Of course, it is still possible for a man to find his life in his work. A minister of the gospel can do so. As Peter Green used to say: 'Had I nine lives like a cat, I should have been a parish priest every time.' A doctor, a teacher, an artist, a craftsman, a motor mechanic who has the thrill of seeing a recalcitrant engine bursting into life—this is all right. But this is not by any means all. In the first place, I doubt if more than 10 per cent of people really choose what they are going to do. They leave the school, and they take the first thing that comes to hand—not because they want to, but because they have to. In the second place, the more developed industry becomes, the more automation takes over, the cleverer we become, the more jobs there are in which a man is a machine-minder, a presser of buttons, a manipulator of switches, a doer of one repetitive action as the article which is taking shape glides past him on the conveyor

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belt. The plain fact is—we cannot find life in that kind of existence. And it is going to become commoner and commoner. The machine replaces the craftsman; an automatic process replaces individual skill; and a man is left doing things in which it is not possible to take a pride.

We have then frankly to admit that under modern conditions a man's work may well be the process by which he earns a living for himself and for his family—and nothing more. And the consequence is that nowadays there are many, an increasing number, who will have to find their real life outside their work.

There are plenty of people who have already solved this problem. There are men who earn a living through the day and who come alive when they sing in a choir or act in a dramatic society in the evening. There are people who through the day earn so much money, and then come home to find life in a Boy's Brigade or a Scout Company, in work for epileptics or spastics, or for the old or the homeless. There are people who have a hobby which is their life.

There are any number of people who have, so to speak, lived double lives. Charles Lamb was the slave of his desk in the office, but he escaped to write the essays the world still reads. C. L. Dodgson was teaching mathematics and writing textbooks, *An Elementary Treatise on Determinants* or *Curiosa Mathematica*, but he was writing *Alice in Wonderland* at the same time. There are people who have a sphere of service or of interest or of art into which they can escape and live.

But there are others who have not, who cannot see beyond the picture house, the television set, the bingo hall, the football match—all good enough things but not things in which a man can invest his life. So certain things are needed.

i. What we are really saying is that a situation is arising when a man needs education for leisure as much as he needs education for work. This must mean the rebirth of education, so that education does not only teach the things necessary to make a living, but also the things which make men able to live.

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There is a sense in which education has broken down. There are areas with schools out of which a child will come never having written one single line in answer to any question, unable to put a paragraph together on paper. There are levels of education out of which the child will come with no reading desire other than the strip cartoon or the comic.

When G. K. Chesterton was a child he had a cardboard toy theatre with cut-out characters. One of the characters was a man with a golden key; he never could remember what character that man with the golden key represented; but that character was always identified in his mind with his father, whom he saw as a man with a golden key who unlocked all sorts of doors leading to all sorts of wonderful things. The dream of education is that education should be a golden key to unlock the doors, not simply to the skills which are necessary to make a living, but to the things of the human spirit, of art, of music, of drama, by which men and women will find life.

ii. Man has a body as well as a mind; and a good deal of the juvenile delinquency which exists is due to men forgetting this fact. It is incredible that many new towns were planned in which there was literally nothing to do; and in which if there was any grass the only thing allowed on it was a notice telling you to keep off it. Eric Fromm the psychologist has said quite truly that everyone—especially a young person—has in him a certain dynamism, a certain almost crude life force, and if that force, that energy, is not directed towards life, it will certainly be directed into destruction. *Destruction is the outcome of un-lived life.* We cannot put a young person in a concrete desert with nothing to do, or in the end he will heave a brick through a window or start a fight through sheer boredom. In the new society there must be plenty to do when the hours of work are done.

iii. In the new world, in which the time after work matters so much, the church must become the centre of the community. Of course, a church is a place where men praise and

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pray, but a church should be far more than that; the church should be the place to which men turn to find the satisfaction of every honest need in life. It is one of the great truths that the better we know a person the more deeply and truly we can worship with him. We can pray best with the man with whom we have played best. The man beside us in church should not be a holy stranger but a living friend.

Long ago, George Bernard Shaw of all people wrote a piece about the church. It is obviously dated now, but in principle it remains the same:

If some enterprising clergyman with a cure of souls in the slums were to hoist a board over his church door with the following inscription: Here men and women after working hours may dance without getting drunk on Fridays; hear good music on Saturdays; pray on Sundays; discuss public affairs without molestation from the police on Mondays; have the building for any honest purpose they choose on Tuesdays; bring the children for games, amusing drill and romps on Wednesdays; and volunteer for a thorough scrubbing down of the place on Thursdays, he could reform the whole neighbourhood.

The church with the seven-day open door must be part of the new era.

iv. One last thing—we have seen that work can be the biggest thing in life, but that for many life will need to begin after the day's work is done. We have been suggesting ways in which this new leisure can be and must be used; but we cannot leave it there. So far our suggestions have been basically selfish. The one thing that could give meaning to life is service—the service of the community. If the mature would remember what they could do for the young, from teaching them judo to teaching them the Bible; if the young would remember what young hands can do for the lonely, the aged and the helpless; if the strong would remember the weak, and if those who have too much would remember those who have too little; if there was an inbuilt obligation to service there would

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be no problem at all, for it is in living for others that a man finds life for himself.

Originally it was at this point that this lecture ended. But not long after it had been televised it was pointed out to me by a university colleague whose views I respect, and who had been leading a discussion group, that it had one basic omission. All through it I have assumed as a first principle that work is an essential part of life, that the Christian ethic presupposes the fact that a man will work. But—I was challenged—what about those who have dropped out from work, or who wish to do so? And I do not mean those who have dropped out through laziness, or through unwillingness to work, or through inability to work. I am not thinking of the person who, without disrespect, can be called the professional lay-about. I am thinking about the person who feels that on nothing less than conscientious grounds he is under obligation to drop out, the person whose decision to drop out is in its own way a religious decision.

There are beyond any doubt young people who feel what is far more than a resentment against society. They feel that society is such that they cannot take part in it. Society, they say, is literally and spiritually polluted. Society is utterly materialised. Society, to use the common phrase, is a rat race. Society grows rich on the manufacture of armaments and the like. Society is the battle of the *have's* to avoid sharing with the *have not's*, to cling on to their possessions and to retain their vested interests at all costs. There are people who honestly and sincerely feel that they are compelled to drop out of such a society. It is not because they are lazy spongers that they opt out; it is because they feel intensely that they do not want to be involved in that which society has become and will become. What have we to say to people like that?

¿. It has to be said that anything like a complete drop-out is, in fact, an impossibility. Whether society is good or bad,

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a man cannot do without it. He has to use the services with which society supplies him. Somehow he has to eat and to live and he depends on society to enable him to do so. In the nature of things we have to use the services which society implies, even to accepting support from the society for which we refuse to work. Completely to opt out of society is not possible. We may disapprove of society, but we cannot sever ourselves completely from it.

ii. One of the great questions in regard to this is—drop out into what? Is the drop-out to be a drop-out into a completely non-productive, negative form of life, where endless talk takes the place of action? Very few would drop out, say, into a monastic order, where with discipline and devotion a man might withdraw from society to pray for the society from which he had withdrawn. Is the drop-out to be from all that the world calls a career into some form of service, the rewards of which are in material terms negligible, but the effect of which is to relieve, as far as we can relieve them, the hunger and the pain and the sorrow of the world? Would a man drop out of life in order in some way to dedicate his life to the end of racialism, the end of war, the end of poverty? This is the acid test. To drop out into utter inactivity is to fail in one's obligation as a human being to other human beings. Protest can often be right; this kind of abdication can hardly ever be right. A man does not shed his responsibilities by ignoring them. A man may deny that he has any obligation to an effete and polluted society; he cannot deny his obligation to humanity.

iii. What I have just said involves and implies something else. A man of really conscientious mind has to decide what he can do and what he can not do. He may come to the conclusion that the society in which he lives is a rotten society from top to bottom. But this does not mean that there are not many things in this society which a man can do without involving himself in the pollution of society, and in doing which he may be the means of purifying—or it might be destroying—this society. The doctor, the social worker, the youth leader,

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often the teacher, the parson are often just as incensed at society as the man who has decided to drop out. The man who drops out has to ask himself if the best way to register his protest is to do nothing. Can you really build life on a negative? Is withdrawal the only way? Is there literally nowhere in society where a man can keep his heart pure and his hands clean? Is there nowhere he can strike a blow for the ideals in which he so intensely believes?

Suppose a person does feel that society is corrupt and materialised and inhuman, suppose that he does feel that he must withdraw from an industrialised society, must he include in his sweeping condemnation the shepherd with his sheep, the ploughman with his plough, the nurse with her patients, the surgeon bringing men back from death to life, the priest slaving his life out in some slum parish? I am not able to believe that there is absolutely nothing that the idealist can find to do. I am quite certain that he can find something to do which will not wound his conscience or outrage his principles.

iv. It would be quite wrong to level the charge against all who drop out, but it is true that many who drop out involve themselves in practices which are more than doubtful. A man may feel so distressed about the evils of society that he drops out from it, and may at the same time involve himself in the ruinous experiments of drug-taking. He may wish to end war and at the same time he may eagerly take part in demonstrations which are in themselves small wars. He may talk about love, and he may be a source of very grave anxiety to those who have loved him most and to those to whom he owes the greatest debt of love. It is very hard to see how ideals which are so high that they compel a man to abandon society can lead him to the kind of life which some of such people have chosen to live.

Further, it is a disturbing fact that there is an element of waste in all this. It often happens that those who drop out from society are people of considerable intellectual ability. They are often young people of very great gifts and of very

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high potential. Unquestionably, such people have a genuine distress in face of the kind of society by which they are surrounded. If that is so, it would be to be expected that their first desire would be to change it. And the only way to change society is from the inside. It is easy to understand the reformer, the rebel, the revolutionary, even the wrecker. It is much more difficult to understand the person whose protest consists in doing nothing. A man on strike certainly withdraws his labour, but he only does so that the conditions of his labour may be reformed and improved, if not for himself, then certainly for those who are to come after him.

v. One other simple thing remains to be said. If a person drops out from the life of society, all the chances are that in the end he will find himself fighting one of the greatest enemies of human life—boredom. There comes a time in life when work of some kind becomes a human necessity. There are many definitions of man, and in the end it may well be true to say that man is naturally a working animal. In every life there are times for doing nothing. It might well be an excellent thing if at some time in every man's life there was such a period; but over the years man was meant to do something, and in the end he will not be happy unless he does.

It would be impossible to question the ideals and the sincerity of many of those who drop out from society. But I do not think that they have chosen the right way, because I do not think that life can be built on a negative, and I do not think that a permanent protest can be based on doing nothing, and I believe that man is better to be even the active enemy of society than the passive abandoner of society.