

# THE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF LABOR ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL AND ST. ILIA THE RIGHTEOUS

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**Abstract.** This conference presentation explores the essential significance of labor in human life from a Christian worldview. The topic is discussed in light of the Holy Scriptures and the literary works of St. Ilia the Righteous. Particular attention is paid to his reflections on the proper and wholesome attitude toward labor. For St. Ilia, labor holds exceptional value in the work of national development, placed alongside true knowledge and prayer.

The study also analyzes the Gospel narrative of Christ's entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, where the symbolic figure of the donkey (Old Georgian *karauli*) is interpreted allegorically. From our perspective, this image may be understood as a symbolic expression of the virtue of diligence.

According to Christian exegetes, the image of the donkey in the Gospel episode of Christ's entry into Jerusalem on the feast of Passover expresses the virtues of humility, obedience, and peacemaking. From this perspective, the association of the donkey with hard labor deserves further attention, especially in view of the Gospel's particular reference to "a colt of a donkey" (Matthew 21:5). The Georgian term *karauli* here refers to a heavily burdened, hard-working animal. By extension, the idea of "labor and toil" points to a form of human work in which one fully realizes God-given potential — and through which the burden of labor is transfigured into Christlike industriousness: "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). Thus, Christ Himself becomes the one who guides the laborer and lightens every burden.

St. Ilia the Righteous shares this Gospel-inspired view of labor. Through the voice of the Widow of Otaraant, he warns that tireless and vigilant labor is necessary, and that the human person must act with full application of his or her innate potential — especially if one seeks Christian perfection. To such a person, Christ's consoling words eternally echo: "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Therefore, the Savior, entering Jerusalem in glory mounted upon a donkey, reveals through the symbolic image of the beast that the burden of labor undertaken through Christian good works is lightened by Christ Himself. God did not bestow upon humanity creative gifts and boundless capacities for idleness. Rather, we are obliged to fully realize our potential so as to consecrate it to divine purpose — for this is the very reason such gifts have been granted to us. True sacrifice offered to God thus consists, for our own benefit, in the total realization and offering of our capabilities in accordance with His will. Through such effort, the blessed goal of deification may at last be attained.

**Keywords:** Christianity; Gospel; Labor; Ilya the Righteous; Diligence.

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**Introduction:** This paper addresses the contemporary relevance of the purpose and meaning of labor in relation to the human person. The central research problem concerns the theological and anthropological

interpretation of labor, its existential necessity, and the formation of a proper ethical attitude toward it. The study examines this issue through the perspectives of Holy Scripture and Saint Ilia the Righteous (Ilia Chavchavadze), whose thought represents an authoritative framework within Georgian Christian intellectual tradition.

The research explores the concept of anthropological perfection in Scripture and analyzes Ilia Chavchavadze's literary works in dialogue with the historical development of attitudes toward labor in Georgia. Particular attention is given to the biblical understanding of labor as presented from the account of Creation onward, including an exegetical interpretation of the Gospel symbol of the "donkey." This symbol is examined within a patristic interpretative framework and analyzed as a multilayered sign associated with obedience, peace, humility, labor, and burden-bearing.

The study further investigates the anthropological dimension of laziness and its moral consequences. In Ilia Chavchavadze's literary corpus, labor is presented as a virtue intrinsically connected with human perfection, moral responsibility, and national survival. The paper also considers the socio-historical conditions necessary for the realization of labor as a constructive force within Georgian historical reality.

The conclusions demonstrate that labor should not be understood merely as an economic or social necessity. Rather, within a Christian anthropological framework, it is interpreted as a path toward deification (theosis), an expression of personal dignity, and a manifestation of the human likeness to the Creator. In this perspective, labor becomes a vocation fulfilled through loving service, transforming necessity into a conscious and ethically grounded participation in spiritual and historical development.

**Research Methods:** The study employs biblical-exegetical, hermeneutical, semiotic, and historical-comparative methods. Biblical interpretation is grounded in patristic tradition and informs the semiotic-allegorical analysis of the Gospel symbol of the "donkey," through which its connection to diligence and moral responsibility is articulated.

The hermeneutical approach establishes an intertextual dialogue between the Gospel narrative and Ilia Chavchavadze's literary works. Additionally, a historical-cultural analysis situates the theme of labor within the broader context of Georgia's historical experience, including questions of national preservation, economic struggle, and cultural mission. Through this interdisciplinary methodology, the study connects theological reflection with social and historical reality.

### **Discussion: 1. The Scriptural Understanding of Labor and the Gospel Symbol of the "Donkey"**

The Bible associates the human vocation with labor already in Paradise: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). Thus, labor appears as an essential dimension of human existence even within paradisiacal blessedness, that is, prior to the Fall.

In order to draw theologically grounded conclusions regarding the theme of labor, it is necessary to consider the issue within the framework of Christian faith. For this purpose, the present study analyzes the semiotic significance of the Gospel symbol of the "donkey" in its association with labor. Scripture frequently employs zoomorphic symbolism, drawing upon the characteristic qualities of animals to convey theological meaning. Among these, particular attention may be given to the donkey in the narrative of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

According to exegetes such as John Chrysostom, Theophylact of Ohrid, Methodius of Olympus, Innocent of Kherson, and Philaret of Moscow, the choice of a donkey symbolically represents peace, obedience, and humility. While these interpretations do not explicitly emphasize labor, a careful reading suggests an implicit association with diligence, particularly given the donkey's traditional role as a burden-bearing animal.

In the Gospel narrative, the animal is described using the Old Georgian term \*karauli\*, which indicates a working donkey accustomed to bearing heavy loads (cf. Matt. 21:5; Zech. 9:9). Philaret of Moscow draws

attention to this detail in connection with the prophecy of Zechariah (Zech. 9:9), noting that although dignitaries had previously ridden donkeys, they did not typically ride a young colt born of a working, burden-bearing animal. The emphasis on such imagery underscores both humility and functional service.

Exegetical tradition often interprets the mother donkey as symbolizing the Jewish people under the Law, while the colt represents the Gentiles who come to accept Christ. At the same time, the symbolic dimension of labor should not be overlooked. In the interpretation of Theophylact of Ohrid, those who were once “bound” outside the Church are loosed through faith and baptism and become capable of “bearing” Christ. Expressions such as “they lifted the Lord upon their shoulders” may be understood as symbolically conveying the Christian transformation of the burden of labor. Labor, when oriented toward Christ, is transfigured: its weight is not abolished but becomes meaningful within discipleship.

This perspective resonates with Christ’s own words: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28); “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:30). The paradox of burden and lightness expresses a specifically Christian understanding in which effort and spiritual struggle are not eliminated but reoriented.

The semiotics of the donkey may also be examined in the Old Testament. In the narrative of Balaam (Num. 22), the donkey becomes an instrument of divine revelation. Likewise, Jacob refers to his son Issachar as a “strong-boned donkey lying down between two burdens” (Gen. 49:14–15), reinforcing the association between the animal and sustained labor. Within biblical zoomorphic symbolism, therefore, the donkey—like the ox—may represent devoted and enduring work.

In the Georgian cultural context, however, the image of the donkey is often associated with stubbornness. Interestingly, in the United States the donkey serves as the symbol of the Democratic Party, where the attribute of stubbornness has been reinterpreted positively as perseverance and refusal to yield. Such reinterpretation illustrates how cultural perception shapes symbolic meaning. The donkey’s capacity to work beyond apparent limits—often silently and without complaint—is frequently misunderstood as foolishness rather than recognized as a virtue.

## **2. The Motif of the Necessity of Labor in the Historical Development of Georgia**

The historical development of Georgia cannot be adequately understood without reference to the culture of labor as a value that gradually became foundational to national self-consciousness. The country’s historical experience demonstrates that labor has never been merely an economic necessity; rather, it has functioned as an ethical, spiritual, and civilizational pillar determining the vitality and resilience of society. Economic advancement and political strength have historically been closely connected to the organization and cultivation of labor. For example, during the Golden Age of Georgian history, the reforms of David IV of Georgia — particularly in agriculture, administrative governance, and urban development — created the structural preconditions for the country’s political and cultural flourishing.

Ilia Chavchavadze regarded labor as the foundation of national survival and cultural identity. In his vision, a responsible attitude toward labor is a sign of a nation’s moral maturity. Labor is perceived as an instrument of national construction — not merely for individual benefit but for the common good. Among the primary concerns necessary for strengthening the country, he assigns priority to the economic sphere. Without rational and organized labor, economic strength cannot be achieved. As he emphasized, “The economic sphere must be given first place among other concerns; it is in the field of economic life that we must seek the means of our strengthening” (Chavchavadze, 1893/1993).

Historical experience reveals a consistent pattern: whenever labor was perceived as dignity and responsibility, Georgia attained cultural and political advancement; conversely, the decline of labor ethics frequently coincided with socio-economic crises. Thus, the motif of the necessity of labor derives both from

the anthropological dignity of the human person — created in the likeness of the Creator — and from the foundational basis of national sustainability. Upon this foundation rests every good that may contribute to the revival of Georgia, despite the historical hardships imposed by repeated invasions and prolonged suffering.

Reflecting upon Georgia's past, Ilia Chavchavadze recalls that no enemy, however armed, could deprive the nation of its land. Yet he warns that a different kind of adversary — one advancing through labor, knowledge, and skill — may undermine a nation that fails to respond with equal diligence. If labor, effort, knowledge, and practical wisdom are not cultivated and placed at the forefront, the very name of the Georgian people may fade, and others may assume stewardship over the country. He interprets modern struggle not as a war of bloodshed but as a “war of sweat” — a peaceful yet demanding struggle grounded in industriousness. This form of struggle, he argues, is honorable and morally elevating, and in many respects surpasses the heroism of armed conflict (Chavchavadze, 1897).

As a writer and public intellectual, Ilia Chavchavadze perceived both the virtues and the shortcomings of his beloved nation with equal intensity. The fate of the homeland accompanied him as a personal sorrow and joy alike. In his notable work *Is He a Man?!* (Georg. *Kacia Adamiani?*), he offers a critique of laziness and irresponsible attitudes toward labor as moral deficiencies that deform human character. Conversely, in *The Widow of Otar's Household* (Georg. *Otaraant Kvrivi*), he presents exemplary models of diligence, prudence, and responsible stewardship. In the following paragraphs, these anthropological characteristics and their consequences in human life will be briefly examined in greater detail.

### **3. Sloth and the Reproachable Traits That Proceed from It.**

Alongside affirming the necessity of labor and diligence for the human person, Holy Scripture repeatedly speaks of the destructive significance of its principal opposing passion—sloth. Already in the Old Testament we read: “Cursed be the one who does the work of the Lord negligently” (Jeremiah 48:10).

Similarly, Saint Gabriel (Gabriel Kikodze), reflecting on the grave sin of negligence, exhorts that one must serve God not only within the church but through every aspect of life: all actions and one's entire existence should be directed toward the glorification of God (Kikodze, Letters).

A particularly sharp critique of laziness and of the improper Georgian attitude toward labor is expressed in Ilia's widely known work *\*\*Katsia Adamiani\*\**. Its main characters, Luarsab and Darejan, represent vivid literary types of the indolent Georgian. For such a person, whose life is shaped by laziness and the moral distortions that proceed from it, the chief preoccupation is reduced to mere consumption. Ilia thus constructs a broader social drama of defective national traits, which critics later termed *\*\*“Tatkaridzeoba”\** (Bakradze, 2004).

Representatives of this “Tatkaridze” type glorify indifference and self-satisfaction; consequently, they create nothing. Where, then, lies their salvation? According to Ilia, the salvation of every person is inseparably connected to the problem of likeness to God. The primary task of the human being is to strive toward the perfection of the Divine Prototype, fulfilling the commandment: *\*\*“Be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect”\** (Matthew 5:48).

Such is the theological-anthropological conclusion presented in *\*\*Katsia-Adamiani\*\**. For Ilia, a man cannot truly be called a human being unless he strives in his life toward the perfection of the primordial Image (Bakradze, 2004).

From a Christian perspective, labor may be understood as a synergistic process—the cooperation of divine grace and human free will. According to the patristic tradition, the human person is called to collaborate with the divine energies in order to realize God's purpose within the created world. In this context, labor ceases to be merely an economic activity; it becomes participation in the creative will of God.

When human creative work—performed responsibly, lovingly, and oriented toward the common good—is fulfilled in accordance with the dignity of the divine image, it assumes a liturgical character: a path toward the transformation and sanctification of the world. Thus, labor is not only a necessity but also a spiritual way—a space in which the human person freely responds to divine grace and becomes a co-worker in the divine history of perfection.

#### **4. The Virtue of Diligent Labor and the Question of Human Perfection**

For Saint Ilia the Righteous (Ilia Chavchavadze), diligent labor constitutes not merely a socio-economic necessity but an ontological and soteriological imperative. Through work, the human person becomes a creative being in the likeness of God and ultimately moves toward deification. Labor is therefore understood as a concrete mode of realizing the *\*imago Dei\** within historical existence.

An exemplary embodiment of this vision appears in Ilia’s widely known work *\*\*Otarant Qvrivi\*\** (*\*The Widow of Otarant\**). Through the voice of the Widow, Ilia articulates the necessity of vigilant and unceasing labor: if one closes one’s eyes to the world even briefly, life will trample one mercilessly. This metaphor underscores not only the ethical obligation of diligence but also the value of time and the responsibility of its prudent use. The Widow thus represents a model of disciplined and well-ordered existence.

Ilia’s perceptive characterization transcends the mere depiction of a hardworking Georgian woman. He simultaneously presents an example of the equal realization of human potential irrespective of gender. By portraying a female protagonist whose strength, wisdom, and perseverance guide her family and household, Ilia implicitly challenges entrenched social stereotypes that restrict the full development of divinely bestowed talents. The Widow demonstrates resilience in every adversity, even overcoming loneliness through purposeful labor (Chavchavadze, 1974: 289).

Faithful to the testament of her equally industrious husband, she not only preserves but increases the family’s livelihood. She raises her son Giorgi as an exemplary figure of diligence, unmatched in physical endurance and commitment within the village. Through Giorgi, Ilia illustrates the harmonious development of human physical capacities united with moral strength. Yet the Widow demands more than industriousness: she insists on the joy of labor, a quality that characterized her late husband, whose vitality persisted even in the face of death (Chavchavadze, 1974: 266).

Mother and son are distinguished by traits that collectively form Ilia’s anthropological ideal: industriousness, self-reliance, generosity (freedom from egoism), attentiveness to both personal and communal good, unity of word and deed, sacrificial fidelity to faith, the overcoming of isolation through work, and the transcendence of fear of death. Their behavior appears unusual—even incomprehensible—to their fellow villagers. As the educated noble Archil observes, they lack the spiritual perception to understand Giorgi’s human depth (Bakradze).

Thus, Ilia presents in concrete historical circumstances the possibility of human perfection within temporal life. The key to such virtue lies in walking rightly before God and in the full realization of creative potential through labor. At the same time, Ilia remains acutely aware that labor requires just conditions. He observes how autocratic oppression forces individuals deprived of freedom into

#### **5. The Liberation of Labor as an Epochal Mission in Georgia**

Permeated by constant concern for the fate of the homeland (“Everywhere and always, O Georgia, I am with you”), Ilia’s literary and public activity sought pathways for the survival of the Georgian nation through mythic-religious and philosophical reflection. In the poem *\*\*Achrđili\*\** (*\*The Specter\**), Ilia presents an allegorical narrative of the Georgian national soul, traversing its past, present, and future in the symbolic form of a wandering spirit.

In this poem, the earlier call to labor develops into a critique of exploitative attitudes toward workers. Instead of experiencing the joy born of free and meaningful labor, workers suffer under oppressive conditions and unjust distribution of the fruits of their toil (Chavchavadze, 1975: 57). The benefits of arduous labor accrue to the master, while the laborer remains deprived alongside his family.

As a herald of a new epoch, Ilia identifies the liberation of labor as the great burden of the century: “The emancipation of labor—that is the mighty task of this age”. His protest against injustice is not merely socio-economic but eschatological in scope. The search for national salvation first finds systematic and coherent expression in his works, forming a programmatic vision for collective action. Its ultimate aim is the establishment of a social order grounded in the reign of labor and in the principles of brotherhood, unity, and freedom—where love and virtue will no longer bear a crown of thorns (Chavchavadze, 1975: 59–60).

Within the allegorical framework of “Achrili”, Ilia implicitly associates the “immortal spirit, present everywhere and always” with Christ—the consoler of the burdened. Through Christ’s philanthropy and grace, violence and exploitation are to be overcome, the chains of the oppressed broken, and authentic brotherhood and freedom realized. The liberation of labor thus becomes synonymous with salvation itself: a return of the nation to the divine trajectory of creative existence.

In Ilia’s theological-anthropological vision, labor is elevated from economic activity to a sacred vocation. It constitutes both the path of personal perfection and the historical mission of the nation—integrating ethics, social justice, and eschatological hope into a unified conceptual framework. Conclusion: The analysis of the research questions clearly demonstrates that both Holy Scripture and Saint Ilia the Righteous (Ilia Chavchavadze) regard labor as one of the most essential virtues, without which a person cannot establish a dignified and authentic life. Biblically grounded theology affirms that even the image of Christ entering Jerusalem in glory—mounted upon a donkey—symbolically points, among other virtues, to humility and industriousness. The Gospel narrative thus reveals that the weight of labor undertaken in accordance with Christian good works is ultimately lightened by Christ Himself.

God did not endow humanity with creative gifts in His likeness for the sake of idleness. Rather, the divine image presupposes continuous activity and the fullest possible realization of the capacities granted to us. Human beings are called to cultivate, develop, and direct their God-given talents toward their proper purpose. The complete and rightly ordered realization of these capacities constitutes both an ethical obligation and a spiritual vocation.

By expending our abilities in their fullest measure for the good, we advance not only personal well-being but also the ultimate goal of human existence—deification (\*theosis\*). In this perspective, labor becomes more than economic necessity; it is the dynamic path through which the human person participates in divine creativity and moves toward the highest destiny of humanity.

Thus, within the theological-anthropological synthesis of Scripture and Ilia’s thought, labor emerges as a sacred vocation, a means of moral formation, and an indispensable condition for both individual perfection and national flourishing.

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