

WORKING FOR JESUS

Erik Peterson, April 28, 2013



INTRO

We believe that the Bible is true. That it is God's word revealed to us, and therefore intensely practical.

Part of our mission statement reads like this,

[God's word] is practical. It is effective in real life, where we live, so we try to keep it real, gritty, earthy and yet always stay true to... the Bible.

Like we said last week, The gospel is about more than just what we do on Sundays. Rather, it should transform all of life.

So I wanted to look at how the Gospel effects where all of us spend so much of our time and energy- our work.

(I must confess, this is a sermon that is born out of much personal frustration. I do not pretend to stand here and have it all together and figured out in my own life.)

Our outline will look like this,

1. God's plan for work
2. Our problems with work
3. How Jesus redeems our work

GOD'S PLAN FOR WORK

Genesis 2:1-3,15

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.
2 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. 3 Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. ... 15 [and] The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

I think that the first two chapters of the book of Genesis are a rich and fascinating text. But too often we barely skim the surface of what's there. Immediately upon opening this chapter, most of us begin to argue about science, and the details of creation.

I don't think that's what Moses had in mind when he penned this passage.

REVOLUTIONARY VIEW OF WORK

This passage is essentially God's workweek. And it is given to us in stark contrast to what the rest of history says.

Historically, work has never been seen as a good thing.

The Babylonian account of Creation in the *Enuma Elish*, the god, Marduk overcomes the goddess Tiamat in a vicious battle, and creates the earth out of her remains.

The Norse Creation story is similar. (Odin, and the body of the Giant)

The Greeks believed that long ago there was a golden age, much like the garden of Eden. In that Golden Age, the gods and humans lived in harmony, and there was no work. The world produced food in abundance.

(In fact, Aristotle said that unemployment, by which he meant the ability to live without having to work, was the primary qualification for a genuinely worthwhile life.)

Essentially, throughout history, work has been seen as a "necessary evil." The Bible introduces itself in direct contrast to the rest of religious thought.

The book of Genesis depicts the magnificent project of the invention of the cosmos, within a regular work week.

And it is God who is doing the work. It is remarkable and unprecedented that in Genesis 1 not only do we see God working, but finding delight in his work. ("It was good.")

GOD WORKS, SO WE WORK

And then, in verse 15 of Chapter 2, we read, [and] The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

The book of Genesis begins with a striking truth, our work was a part of paradise. This means that Work is not a part of the fall, but the Good intention of God's creation.

This means you were created for work. You notice this is true when you stop working. At first it seems nice, like a vacation, but soon you begin to feel useless.

ALL WORK HAS DIGNITY

Too often we don't realize this. This historic mindset of work as a "necessary evil" has pervaded our thinking. Because of this it leads us to believe that some forms of work are more noble, or dignified than others. We often believe that lower-status or lower-paying jobs are an assault on our dignity.

The Biblical view though, is decidedly different. Work of all kind reveals our true dignity as human beings- because it reflects the image of God in us.

The Great Reformer, Martin Luther put it this way:

It is pure [fiction] that Pope, bishops, priests, and monks are called the "spiritual estate" while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the "temporal estate." This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and that for this reason: *all christians are truly of the spiritual estate*, and there is no difference among them except that of office... We are all consecrated priests by baptism, as St. Peter says: "You are a royal priesthood and a priestly realm."

Luther here is arguing that God calls all Christians equally to their work, whether that work is "religious" or "secular" in nature. (In fact, this division of "secular" work, and "spiritual" work is wholly unnecessary.) All work is God's work.

Look, for instance, at Psalm 147. While teaching this passage, Luther lays out his basic idea of vocation.

Verse 13 says, "God strengthens the bars of your gates." How does God do this? Through the smith that makes the bar, the carpenter that places it, the army that guards the wall, good government, and wise rulers. ***This is how God strengthens the city. Through the work of regular people.***

As Dick Lucas observes,

If you were to go to a book table at a church and see a biography with the title, "The Man God Uses" or "The Woman God Uses," You would immediately think it was the story of a missionary, teacher, or church leader. But what you see in the story of Joseph, is a man, highly successful in his secular work. (Home manager, prisoner, government official, king of Egypt.) Being a preacher or leading a bible study in many ways is easier. There is a certain spiritual glamour to it. It is often hard to

get Christians to see that God is willing not just to use men and women in ministry, but in all professions.”

All work has dignity because it is something that God does, and because we do it in God’s place, as God’s representatives.

It is hard for us today to realize how revolutionary this idea has been in the history of human thinking. One preacher, Phillip Jensen, puts it this way,

“If God himself came into the world, what would he be like? For the ancient Greeks, he might have been a philosopher-king. The ancient Romans might have looked for a just and noble general. But how does the God of the [Bible] come into the world? As a carpenter.”

ALL WORK IS VOCATION

Vocation means “calling.” Something can be a vocation or calling, only if some one else calls you to do it, and you do it for their sake, rather than only for your own.

Work was intended to serve others. Not simply to be a means to our own end, namely, a paycheck.

Author Lester DeKoster does an excellent job of explaining this,

Work is the form in which we make ourselves useful to others... in which others make themselves useful to us. We plant; God gives the increase to unify the human race...

[Look at] the chair you are lounging in... Could you have made it for yourself? ... How [would you] get, say, the wood? God and fall a tree? But only after first making the tools for that, and putting together some kind of vehicle to haul the wood, and constructing a mill to do the lumber, and roads to drive on from place to place? In short, a lifetime or two to make one chair! ... If we worked not forty, but one hundred and forty hours per week we couldn’t make ourselves from scratch even a fraction of all the goods and services that we call our own. [Our] paycheck turns out to buy us the use of far more than we could possibly make for ourselves in the time it takes us to earn that check... Work ... yields far more in return upon our efforts than our particular jobs put in...

Dekoster goes on to ask, what would happen if everyone quit working right now? Society would quickly melt away. We’d all be foraging for scraps of food, huddled around campfires, sleeping in caves.

Your work is more than just a paycheck. It is contributing to the function and good of all of society.

And society, remember, is just a word we use to describe a gathering of God's image bearers, people whom he desperately loves. These are the people you are serving at your day job. (James 2:15-16, *"Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?"*)

This view of work often does not describe my average week. It seems that something has gone wrong.

OUR PROBLEMS WITH WORK

The story of Genesis 1 - 2 tells us two things about the world

1. The whole earth is good. God made, he loves it.
2. The whole earth is fallen. Nothing is untouched by sin.

Romans 8 similarly says, that the "whole creation groans, and longs for the day of God's redemption.

This is true of our work. God's intention for our work is good, but, it is stained by the fall. Because of the fall, work is hard. (Hard seems like quite the understatement, doesn't it? The bible uses the words 'painful toil'.)

WORK BECOMES FRUITLESS

One of the effects that sin has on our work is that it becomes fruitless.

That means that, in all our work, we will always be able to envision far more than we can accomplish.

You will face lack of ability, resistance from people and social structures of a fallen world. The experience of work will include pain, conflict, envy, and fatigue.

Because of the nature of God's creation, we need to work for our happiness and contentment. And because of God's intentions for our work we have glimpses of what we *could* accomplish. But because of the fall, our work is full of frustration, because what we envision, and what we accomplish are so often quite different.

This often leads to cynicism, doesn't it? We say things like, "Nothing really changes. Don't get your hopes up. Just do what it takes to make a living. Don't let yourself care too much."

WORK BECOMES POINTLESS

Cynicism does not cure the woes of fallen work. I've tried that band-aid. It leads to an unhealthy separation of "work-life" and "real-life." I start to see my day job as simply a means to a paycheck.

I see it as a largely pointless task to support the rest of my life, which if your are a christian, is filled with real work. "Ministry."

You feel condemned to living a kind of dual life; never connecting what you do on Sunday morning with what your do the rest of the week.

What we really long for, though, is for our work to matter. We want to make an impact, to get personal recognitions, to make a difference, to make the world a better place.

But as we saw last week, Solomon tells us something startling. Even when you do achieve what you envision, it's still pointless. "All my work" he said, "was grievous to me, meaningless, like chasing after the wind." In short, even if your work is not pointless, in the end it will always seem meaningless, if it's not connected to something more than this short life.

HOW JESUS REDEEMS WORK

2 Kings chapter 3 gives us a wonderful illustration of these principles. I'll paraphrase the story for you.

The nation of Israel was at war with Moab. Israel gathered the help of the nations of Judah, (The two southern tribes of Israel) and Edom. After discussing the plan of attack, they decided to attempt a surprise attack from the desert of Edom.

I'm not sure what these Kings were thinking, maybe they forgot that deserts weren't exactly known for their abundant water supply, but they quickly realized that this was a bad idea. They were going to die of thirst before they made it out of the desert.

But as God would have it, the prophet Elisha, happened to come along for the adventure. His advice was anything but encouraging. "Make this valley full of trenches." God will not bring rain, but he will bring water.

Can you imagine the work of digging those trenches? When your dying of thirst in a desert, that last thing you want to do is sweat! I'm sure this work felt both pointless, and fruitless.

But what we see of the Character of God in this story, is that he is bigger than our problems with work. He is able to use our seemingly fruitless and pointless work to do his will.

The first thing God did with these ditches is amazing. He miraculously caused a flash flood to sweep through the valley, and fill the trenches with water. Israel, Judah, and Edom were saved.

But the next thing God did was unimaginable. He caused the armies of Moab to see those trenches as full of blood, and thus assumed their war already won. Bringing victory to his people.

OUR TRENCHES

You see, God can use your work, no matter how fruitless, pointless, or frustrating it seems. And he can use it, not only in ways that make sense to you, but in ways that are totally beyond what you think possible.

Whatever your “trench” is, God has called you to it for a purpose, even though you may not yet know it.

Colossians 3:23 “Whatever you do, do your work whole heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, ... It is the Lord, Christ whom you serve.

This doesn't mean pretend. Those men digging the trenches were doing so, because God actually asked them to.

We have to see our work in the same light. We don't pretend we are working for Jesus, we must realize that Christ has given us our particular jobs for a reason, so we should do them well.

WORK AS MINISTRY

This does not simply mean, “preach the gospel to your co-workers.” It isn't less than that, but much more. God called you a task, a large part of your ministry is doing that task well.

Our work then becomes a way to serve God, rather than to serve ourselves. A way to please God by doing his work in the world, for his name's sake.

Imagine having in your home someone whom you have admired all your life and whom you never thought you would meet. Someone you revere. You will not act casually; you will make every effort to fulfill his or her every request and wish.

This is how we should regard Christ's interest in our work.

CHRIST'S WORK FOR US

Lastly, this study would be incomplete if we didn't look to Jesus, our ultimate example, and the one for whom we work.

How did he work? In John 17, Jesus looks at his disciples and says to the Father, "For them I sanctify myself." The word sanctify means to set your self apart, it means that every minute of the day, every activity is done in such a way as to contribute to one aim.

And so it was with Jesus. He set himself apart for the work of our salvation. He lost everything, endured everything to obtain it. Jesus' work was for you and for his Father, never for himself.

When you realize what he has done to rescue you, your pride and envy begin to disappear because you don't need to get your self-worth from being richer, cooler, or more powerful.

Instead of working selfishly, you're free to work selflessly. Because you are adopted into God's family and are justified in his sight, you have nothing to prove. You are loved without end, and this is the resource for all your work, a quiet inner fullness of Christ's love.

Jesus loves you more than you understand. He loves the world more than you ever could, and he invites you to work for him, in serving, loving, and redeeming the world.