

WORK MATTERS

(GENESIS 1:26-28, 31, 2:1-2, 5, 7, 15)

Well, I'm really excited that for the next couple of weeks we're going to be diving into this topic of work. Work is one of the biggest parts of our lives. Most of us spend almost half of our waking hours at work. You might be thinking that the very reason you come to church is to get away from work, but I'm going to thrust you right back there as we begin to think about what the Bible says about work. The question we're asking over the next couple of weeks is what is our work really about? Does our work really matter to God. In the whole scheme of things, other than getting a paycheck, what does it really matter whether I show up for my 9-5?

But before we get started, I want to make sure that you understand that the biblical perspective on work is not just a job, the Bible talks about vocation or a calling. And so if you're here and you're unemployed or your retired, or you're a stay at home mom, this is for you too! All of us work!

The Bible gives us a rich picture of what work ought to be. And what the Bible pictures isn't just "good advice" on how to win friends and influence people or how to win employee of the month. The Bible gives us a foundation for understanding work that can transform how we see our life if we embrace it.

Over the next two weeks, the comparison I would make is that if we were painting a wall, what I want to do this morning is take the biggest brush that we have and just, with broad strokes, cover this wall, just slap as much paint up there as we can... and next week, we're going to take the finer brush and begin to fill in some of these edges and corners and make the wall look pretty.

I want to give you just a theological foundation for work that will help us to understand what work is all about. And that is centered on this BIG IDEA - it's not anything revolutionary, in fact it's quite simple: Work is an integral part of God's purposes in creation. And I want to unpack that thought by observing four things in the first couple chapters of Genesis this morning. I'm not going to give them to you all right now, but we'll unpack them as we go along.

First we need to begin where Genesis begins. Gen. 1:1 is one of my favorite verses in the Bible because it sets the stage for what we are to be centered on, what we're about. The whole Bible starts with this... "IN the beginning, GOD...." In whatever we do, whatever we think, we always need to start with God. We don't begin with ourselves and then move to God, we start with God and then begin to move to our issues. So this morning we're going to start with God. In Genesis 1 we are confronted by **a God who works.**

The picture in Genesis of God creating through work is unlike any other story in any other religion or culture in the world. If you look at most other cultures, stories of creation revolve around conflict. There is a struggle between warring cosmic powers and at the end of it, somehow, out pops the universe. The Babylonian creation myth, tells the story of the god Marduk who defeats the goddess Tiamat and forges the world out of her dead corpse. What Genesis shows us is just slightly different. Instead of battling rival gods, the Bible's God stands without rivals. All of creation is made by his hand. So, instead of creation coming into being as a result of war, creation is more like the work of an artist or a craftsman.

And for most other cultures, because creation isn't the result of any work, the idea of a god working is totally foreign. In Greek mythology there is a legendary golden age talked about where the gods and humans lived in harmony together and neither of them have to do any work. The earth would provide food of its own accord in abundance and they're able to just lounge around the pool and drinking cocktails and hanging out. The God of the Bible couldn't be more different. It's not that God is against lounging by the pool - he is for enjoying his creation. But from the beginning God worked. And his work wasn't something that was brought in later after sin and Satan showed up on the scene. Neither is his work something only meant for humans and beneath his station. God worked for the sheer pleasure of work. We see this picture in Genesis 1 of God creating and standing back and looking at his creation and saying, "That is good!" Work is essential to who God is.

For the ancient greeks, the result of this perspective on work - that it was something that was beneath the gods, that only humans would do to serve the gods - meant that work was nothing more than a curse. So greek philosophers like Aristotle

and Plato saw the ability to live without having to work as the main qualification for living a worthwhile life. They thought withdrawal from the busyness of active life to a life of philosophy and contemplation was the way to true peace and happiness. The ideal was to be as little involved and connected to the material world as possible. For them, there was a gigantic gulf between what they saw as spiritual and what they saw as mundane and physical. Philosophy and contemplation and study were god-like and spiritual while any other work really wasn't valuable.

This kind of thinking didn't just vanish after Plato and Aristotle died. During the Reformation the separation of what was seen as real spiritual tasks and just worldly work was a huge issue that Martin Luther dealt with. At the time of the reformation the Catholic church saw itself as representing the fullness of God's kingdom on earth. So the only work that qualified as God's work was work within the church. The language that was used for these two types of work, in the church and outside the church, were called "spiritual estate" and "temporal estate". Luther, who never pulled punches in confronted things, said this:

"It is pure invention 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."

What Luther is saying is that there's not two types of work. Spiritual work and then carnal, worldly work. In fact, all work is spiritual work. Now, most of us have probably heard of Luther's theology of the priesthood of all believers, but we usually just apply that to individual Christians in the church. You know, this idea that we no longer need to go through intermediaries other than Christ to get to God. But Luther applied that thinking beyond the walls of the church by saying that our vocation, *whatever* it happens to be, is as much a spiritual calling as being a priest or monk.

Now, this is huge for us today, because what Luther is saying is that being a roofer or a welder or working in an office or being a stay at home mom, is as much a spiritual calling as being a pastor or a missionary. Being in full-time ministry isn't a calling that is higher than any other vocation. We don't have the superhero Christians

who become missionaries and pastors and then the ordinary Christians, without any superpowers, that end up as truck drivers or in sales. All work is spiritual.

And this is rooted in the fact that we have a God who works. If we understand that work isn't beneath God, but integral to who he is... If we understand that the most amazing and powerful spiritual being in the universe, created everything by digging in the dirt and getting his hands dirty, through the most mundane physical action - work - it should transform this separation in our minds between what we see as physical and what we see as physical. What we see as sacred and what we see as secular. Whatever you do it is a spiritual calling.

2. The first thing we see is a God who works. Secondly we see that God **created us as image-bearers.**

Now, let's jump over the first five days of creation to God's creation of man. So far God has created the sun, moon and stars. He's created land and oceans and plants and every type of animal.... and all of them he's created with a word from his mouth. But we get to the creation of man and something different happens. God takes some dirt in his hands and he forms man and then God breathes life into him. Man is made of different stuff than everything else, there is something that separates him from this creature world. Look at v. 26 and 27:

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

The theological term for this is the latin word *imago dei* the image of God. An image is a representation, a likeness of something else. Whether it's in a painting, a sculpture, a camera, or a mirror, an image is a reflection of what it represents. When God makes humans in his own image, it means he's designed them to reflect him, to show what he is like. Now this plays out in a lot of ways, but not least of those is reflecting who God is as a working God. When we work how God works - for a purpose other than self-fulfillment and financial gain - we show the world what God is like. Work is an integral part of what God has designed us for as his image bearers. Human thriving is based on doing what we were designed to do. Fish don't do well out of

water and other than penguins, birds don't hold up too well in the water. The true path to well being then isn't withdrawal from work, but working the way God works - for His glory and the good of others.

I'm not sure how many of you have seen the movie Wall-E, but if you haven't you really should. The movie is about WALL-E this cute robot whose job is to clean up a trashed earth. Humans used to live there but have produced so much trash that they had to be evacuated in a space shuttle with the hope of returning one day after robots clean up the mess. At the beginning of the movie WALL-E, who is a little lonely working by himself all day, meets another robot named Eve. WALL-E quickly falls in love with EVE and ends up following her into outerspace to the spaceship where the humans are now living a "utopian," carefree, work-free existence. As residents of the spaceship, humans are waited on hand and foot by robots attending to their every whim and desire. As a result, the pampered humans have become self-indulgent, bored couch potatoes. The humans hover around the ship on padded recliners complete with video screens right in front of their faces and giant big gulp cups from which they sip their daily calorie intake. The adult humans now look more like giant babies with soft faces, rounded torsos, and stubby, weak limbs. Finally, when WALL-E and EVE show them evidence that earth is now inhabitable again, the ship slowly begins waking up from the hypnosis of worklessness they have been in. What the Pixar writers explore so well is that though a life of leisure and consumption may seem appealing, it results in something repulsively less than human. We weren't created to be do-nothings, but in the image of a God who works. Work is part of what it means to image the God who created us, and it's only when we fulfill that purpose that God created us for that we can live in health and wholeness.

3. Work as stewardship and cultivation.

We've seen that man is different from flora and fauna in that they are created in the image of God. If we keep reading we'll see that man is also the only one in creation who gets a job description. Plants and animals are told to reproduce, but look what God says to man:

"Be fruitful and multiply (there's the reproduction) and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion..." - v. 28

Man is called, under God, to take some type of ownership or rulership of the earth. He's told to subdue it. This word "subdue" doesn't indicate that somehow inside the garden was paradise and outside was a world of evil ravenous beasts that had to be controlled and overcome. Subduing is much more about tending the good things God has given us. I face this on a weekly basis in my yard. The grass grows - God made it to grow and reproduce and every week I have to subdue it. That isn't a result of sin and the fall, it's a part of tending God's good creation.

Though God's entire creation was good, it wasn't a finished product. God intentionally put in place the potential for cultivation within his creation that he had designed man to unlock through work. We see this in Genesis 2:5:

"When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up - for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground..."

Why was there no bushes or plants yet? Genesis give us two reasons. God hadn't brought rain yet, and there was no man to work the ground. God intentionally designed his creation to be cultivated through our partnership with him. As we work we develop and expand God's good creation. An illustration might help. We're always arguing about what came first - the chicken or the egg. Well, we know it was the chicken.... But when that first egg came out, at least the first edible one, how do anyone know what to do with it? One day walking in the cool of the garden did God take Adam aside and say.... "OK, this is an egg, you can eat it and you can eat it in a number of ways. You can boil it, fry it or scramble it. It works in all your baking to hold things together. You can separate the white from the yolk and make delicious meringue pies. You can add broccoli and a crust and make quiche. Actually, I'm sure God would never have said that... All of this was discovered by human cultivation of God's good creation.

Now this isn't just some humanistic testimony to the power of man's ingenuity. In fact, it speaks more about our God and his fatherly delight in letting his kid's do his work with him. Any of you who are parents of little ones know what this is like. My

girls are constantly asking to help me with things. It always takes longer to do things with them, but there is a delight in doing work together that teaches them and fills us both with joy. God delights to do his work through human agents.

I already mentioned Martin Luther and his confrontation of the way the catholic church saw work. Luther also saw this providential hand of God in the carrying out of even the most mundane tasks in this world. One day Luther was reading in Psalm 145 and 147 which both speak of God's providence. Psalm 145 says - *"The eyes of all look to you and you give them their food in due season."* Luther saw that the Bible says that it's God who provides our food, and yet all around God using people as his means of doing this. He even saw this in the Lord's prayer, in praying for our daily bread. Here's Luther:

"When you pray for daily bread you are praying for everything that contributes to you having and enjoying your daily bread... you must open up and expand your thinking, so that it reaches not only as far as the flour bin and the baking oven but also out over the broad fields, the farmlands, and the entire country that produces, processes and conveys to us our daily bread and all kinds of nourishment."

So Luther saw vocation as the way that God distributes to all of us his good gifts. His famous saying was that "God milks the cows through the vocation of the milk maids."

Where this touches down for most of us is that we see the only Kingdom value of our work in making money to give to God's work or in evangelizing our coworkers. Both of these are good things, but they only touch the surface of God's purpose in our work. Genesis 2:15 summarizes our work's purpose in why God put man in the garden. *"The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it."*

God has designed that our work partners with him in both cultivating and stewarding what he's given us. As we work we're looking after and advancing God's good creation. This transforms the way we see our work. Our work itself really matters. On those days that I'm out wiring switches and plugs it's not just mundane action that gets me a paycheck, I'm actually a part of stewarding God's creation to keep the world moving. And this changes how I see and interact with others. What if I really did see

others as the hands through which God providentially looks after me? This view of work is vast and all-encompassing....

In his book *Work Matters*, Tom Nelson says, "First and foremost, work is not about economic exchange, financial remuneration, or a pathway to the American Dream, but about God-honoring human creativity and contribution. Our work, whatever it is, whether we are paid for it, is our specific contribution to God's ongoing creation and to the common good.

4. God created us to worship him through work.

Look back at Genesis 2:15 and God's commission to man in Eden. Man was meant to both "work it and keep it." That word "work" is the Hebrew word *avodah*. In the OT it can be translated as work, service, craftsmanship and in many instances... worship. What Genesis 2:15 is saying is that God's original design is that our work and worship would be seamlessly integrated together. Work is worship.

And this isn't just an OT idea. What does Paul say in Colossians? Turn over to Col. 3:23-24. After Paul gives specific instructions for different stations or vocations in life - wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves.... he says - "***Whatever*** you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Jesus Christ."

So what does it look like to worship God through our work? Dorothy Sayers, who was a British contemporary of C.S. Lewis wrote extensively on this in an article entitled "Why Work?" In it she said this: "The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him to not be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables. What is the Christian understanding of work? The only Christian work is good work well done." What she is saying, I believe, is that one of the primary was that we worship God in our work is doing whatever we do with excellence.

In the movie Chariots of Fire, the great Scottish runner Eric Liddel's father expressed it in simpler terms - "You can praise the Lord by peeling a spud, if you peel it to perfection."

If we think in this way it answers one of the questions that we're always asking. How many of you have ever asked, "What does it mean to be a Christian _____? What does it mean to be a Christian barista, or a Christian foreman, or a Christian teacher? Well, we might say... it means that you talk to your customers about Christ, or you teach from a Christian worldview. It may mean all that, but that is not the only way work serves to worship God.

Let me give you an example. If you haven't been back in my office yet, you really ought to go back there, because Karl built me the most amazing standing desk you have ever seen. Solid steel, with a pen holder and a drink stand. Now was the act of Karl building that table for pleasing to God because he made it for a pastor who it's going to allow me to study better and for longer because I'm not uncomfortable sitting all day, and because I study better I'll preach better, and because I preach better the church will grow and more people will come to Christ and more people will go serve the Lord in their communities and around the globe advancing God's kingdom? Or is Karl building me that table pleasing to God because God created him with a gift for perfect welds and a calling on his life to use that gift and when he does that well and crafts beautiful things - THAT is worship?

Being a Christian anything means, that by God's grace and power, to do what you do with excellence. If God has called and gifted you to be a pilot, being a Christian pilot means landing softly and safely. If God has called and gifted you to sell products, sell as many of those products with honesty and integrity as you can. That doesn't mean we have to be the best at our particular job or God isn't pleased, but our humble, God-centered pursuit of excellence is a pleasing act of worship before God.

John Coltrane, one of the most gifted jazz musicians of all-time, expressed this thought beautifully in the liner notes of his album "A Love Supreme". He wrote this:

"This album is a humble offering to Him. An attempt to say "THANK YOU GOD" through our work, even as we do in our hearts and with our tongues. May He help and strengthen all men in every good endeavor."

There is a lot more to be said. You might be sitting there thinking - yeah, but what you're saying is all still before sin entered the picture. And you're right, sin seriously messes things up. And we're going to get there. Next week.... We serve a God who works, he has created us to reflect him through work, to steward and cultivate his creation through work, and most of all to worship him through our work.