

September 4, 2022

“A Theology of Work”

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

FCF: A failure to reflect on what it is to work

PROPOSITION: (magnet) The gospel speaks to all of life, including our work.
(anchor) We need to hear it.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Christ is Lord, King over all. That is fundamental to the Christian faith. Nothing in our lives is excluded. And nothing is understood rightly or coherently without reckoning with this.

That being the case, we must continually ask ourselves, “*What areas of my life are being excluded from His rule?*” Not as though we could really hide anything from Him. But where might we be ignoring Him? What areas call for examination? Where would we start? What things in our lives demand our attention, drive our energies, and dominate our relationships?

Work – paid or volunteer, in or out of the home - has to be included in that list. Consider the number of hours, days, weeks, and years we devote to work, to labor of varying kinds. Think of the place it occupies in our lives. It, like everything else, must be put under the rule of Jesus.

SCRIPTURE READING: 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

This is “Labor Day” weekend. For most of us, Labor Day signals the end of summer and is marked with time off, cookouts, and sports. Where did it come from? What is its history? The intent was to pay tribute to the contributions and achievements of American workers. It was created by the labor movement in the late 19th century and became a federal holiday in 1894.

(**READ Psalm 24:1**) This cannot be stressed enough. To fail to stop and think – that is the great mistake of our time. To set our thinking in a way that runs counter to biblical truth – that is the great mistake of any time. I have a simple point to make this morning, one I’ve already alluded to. The gospel speaks to all of life, including our work. We need to hear it.

We need to hear these three things. First, that work is good. Second, that work is bad. And, third, what it means to work – how we are to live in the tension of those first two points.

I. **WORK IS GOOD**

The first and fundamental thing to say is work is good (**READ Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15**).

A) *Commanded to Work*

1. The creation mandate

This is the creation mandate. We are commanded to work. It is essential to being human.

2. From the beginning

And we see this from the very beginning. Work is not in any way a part or product of the Fall.

B) *Created to Work*

From the beginning, we are commanded to work. For we were created to work.

1. God as worker

We were created by a God who works. He is portrayed as a gardener, a shepherd, a potter, a physician, a teacher, a vine-dresser, a metal-worker. Counter to the myths of the ancient world, the true God is, in fact, a worker, working incessantly in creation, providence, and salvation.

2. Man as worker

And we are made in His image, according to His likeness. So to work is basic to being human.

What then is the first thing we can say about work? It is first and fundamentally good.

Application:

Why then should a Christian work? What makes our work of value? It is not so that we can give money to the church – though we should. It is not so that we can have a place to go as a mission field – though we might. Nor is it to free us to then do the “real” work of the kingdom.

Such things do not give our work value. The reason we work, what gives it value - no matter the form it takes - is simply this. We were made to work and God values our work. Let me say that again. Our work has value because we were made to work and God values our work.

The gospel, you see, speaks to all of life, including our work. We need to hear this.

II. WORK IS BAD

That said, there’s more to say. The Bible also says work is bad (**READ Genesis 3:16-19**).

A) The Futility of Work

Why is work so hard? What’s gone wrong? The Fall, which brought a futility to work.

1. Loss of dominion

There is a loss of dominion – thorns, thistles, and death. The Fall brought hardship upon work.

2. Dehumanizing

Which is why it can be dehumanizing – a lack of fulfillment or unrealized gifts and potential.

B) The Idolatry of Work

The Fall brought futility to work. And it also set in motion the idolatry of work.

1. What we trust

We trust in our work and its fruits. We look to it to give comfort and ease, security and control, standing and affirmation. We look to our work instead of to the Lord to give us these things.

2. Who we are

And we let our work define us. We look to it for identity. We allow “what we do” to become tangled up with “who we are”. Think just of how we introduce ourselves. “*What do you do?*”

So there’s a tension. Work is fundamentally good. But it is fundamentally bad, broken.

Illustration:

There’s a scene in the film, *Chariots of Fire*, that illustrates this. One of the main characters, Harold Abrahams, a talented 100-m sprinter and, in the story, something of a foil to Eric Liddell, is in the training room prepping for a race. And he says to a friend (**READ quote**):

And now in one hour's time I'll be out there again. I'll raise my eyes and look down that corridor four feet wide with ten lonely seconds to justify my whole existence.

Abrahams wins the race. But there is no joy for him, not even in winning, in achieving his goal.

Application:

The futility and idolatry of work. How do we see this playing out? We lose our balance. We go to extremes. We say, “*Work is everything*” – making it what we live for. Or we swing the other way and say, “*Work is nothing*” – ignoring its rightful place, living for the weekend.

Both are flawed. The gospel speaks to all of life, even our work. We need to hear this.

III. HOW TO WORK

So, where does this leave us? How do we live with the tension of these two poles? Let me suggest these four things, four pillars of sorts we can apply to our everyday labor and work.

A) *With Hope in View*

First, as Christians, as disciples of Jesus, we can and should work with hope in view.

1. Meaning assured

(**READ 1 Corinthians 15:58**) We can be assured there is meaning and purpose to all our work.

2. The curse reversed

Another part of that hope is the sure and coming reversal of the curse (**READ Isaiah 65:17-25**).

B) *With Integrity*

We work with hope. Which frees and impels work with integrity (**READ Micah 6:8**).

1. Just and honest dealing

This means just and honest dealing. Deceit in buying and selling ruled out. Fair wages paid out.

2. Diligent labor

Diligent labor – laziness seen as condemned. Stealing neither goods nor time from employers.

C) *In Relationship*

We work with hope and integrity. And then also in relationship with others as servants.

1. Those over us

Servants to those over us, giving them respect and honor, even when they don't deserve it.

2. Those under us

Servants to those under us, giving them respect and honor, never lording authority over them.

D) *Coram Deo*

We work with hope, with integrity, in relationship. And, finally, coram deo.

1. Explanation

That is a Latin phrase meaning “in the presence of God” – all seen as under, to, from, for Him.

2. Application

Meaning there is no line drawn between “the secular” and “the sacred”. For there is no such line. This flew in the face of 1st century thought which saw a line between manual and mental labor, between the blue and white collar. And it flies in the face of much 21st century thought – even in

the church – that often sees a line between the spiritual and the regular things of life, not just a division but even a hierarchy of labor. Martin Luther is said to have quipped (**READ quote**):

The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays—not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.

The gospel frees us to work with hope, with integrity, in relationship, and coram deo.

CONCLUSION:

One of the struggles of western culture is with living a splintered life – family, friends, work, and play all spread out as separated spheres with little overlap between them. I fear we often suffer from a splintered faith as well. *“This is Sunday. That is Monday. And they have little to do with each other.”* Or *“This is what God is interested in. The rest doesn’t matter.”*

But that’s not the biblical vision. The biblical vision is Sunday and Monday as being like a seamless robe. All of it is part of worshipping God. All of it is holy. All of it matters to Him.

For Christ is King, ruling and redeeming all. The gospel speaks to all of life, including our work. We need to hear this. To the extent we do, our work will be far better for it. And we will then be all the more salt and light, the city on a hill that the Lord intends His people to be.

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