

## Work and the Common Good

Jeremiah 29:1-7

Faith Evangelical Free Church

2.3.19

In Phoenix, AZ there is an organization called “Hustle PHX” that is dedicated to helping people put their God-given talents, skills, and opportunities to work. The founder and Executive Director of Hustle PHX is a man named Oye Waddell, who makes it very clear that his Christian faith is what motivates him and his team to do what they do and serve who they serve.

But Hustle PHX is not a missions organization or a ministry, at least not in the way we traditionally think about those sort of things. They don’t train pastors or recruit individuals to be sent into different cultures all over the world. Instead, they focus on finding hard working people -- living right in their own community -- who need things like job training, business education, or financial capital to be given a chance to thrive at work.

If you visit their website you’ll find that their mission is simple, practical, and an incredible way to bring blessing into people’s lives.

*“Motivated by Christian faith, Hustle PHX encourages the creation of sustainable business ventures that affirm the dignity of people and lead to the flourishing of all communities in Phoenix.”<sup>1</sup>*

In other words...they combine their faith in Jesus Christ and the work of their everyday lives in order to contribute to the well being of the people around them and the community they live in...for the Common Good.

That’s the idea that we want to explore today as we continue our series, Faith At Work: ***As a Christian, your work is meant to be a way for you to bless the people around you and the communities into which God sends you.*** Your work has a role to play in the common good -- the flourishing and thriving -- of the world around you.

Now in just a minute we’re going to take a look at a few Biblical texts that can help us wrap our minds and hearts around this idea that our work is intended to benefit not only ourselves but others as well, but before we do that I need to make something very clear:

***You should always regard your work first and foremost as a way to serve Christ and glorify God.***

All work -- *whatever is the main thing you do every day and every week, whether or not you get paid for it* -- all work can and should be done with the mindset of being done unto the Lord. That’s what the Apostle Paul wanted to be sure all Christians understood when he wrote in his letter to the Colossians,

Colossians 3:23–24 (ESV)

*[23] Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, [24] knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hustlephx.com/>

So our work is first and foremost an expression of our devotion to and love for God. Once you have that foundation laid, you can then move on to exploring the questions that we will be thinking about this morning,

- What is the role of my work in relation to the people around me?
- In what ways do I serve my neighbor through what I do?

Ultimately what we're exploring this morning is a question many of us have probably struggled with at some time in our life: *does the thing that I do even matter to anyone but me?*

We all want to know that our work has significance to the lives of other people. We have a seemingly inherent, perhaps God-given desire to contribute to something greater than ourselves.

Nobody wants to spend the best hours of their week doing something that feels trivial. So how do we think about our work, how do we think about and engage our day-to-day tasks and toil in a way that goes beyond ourselves and reaches out to others, and to God?

With these questions in mind let's take a look at the passage we're going to focus on today, found in the Old Testament Book of Jeremiah, Chapter 29.

Jeremiah was a prophet who brought the word of God to the people of Israel who dwelt in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, during the nation's final years before its eventual fall to the Babylonian Empire.

I do not have time to properly or thoroughly survey the historical events that led up to the situation at hand in our passage this morning, Jeremiah 29:1-7. Suffice it to say: In the year 609 BC a really great Israelite King named Josiah died, and unfortunately a series of not-so-great kings succeeded him. One by one each of these lesser rulers made personal, political, and religious decisions that ultimately doomed the nation.

From 605-587 BC Babylon repeatedly invaded, occupied, and eventually destroyed nation of Judah, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple King Solomon had built as the earthly dwelling place for the One True God.

The Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, had more than 10,000 Israelites deported and exiled from their homeland, forcing them to scatter their leadership and resources throughout the empire. They were spread too thin to organize and rebel, but were allowed to live as long they complicitly accepted their new lot in life.

In order to help them adjust to their surroundings and life outside their homeland, the prophet Jeremiah sends a letter to the exiles with some advice for how to get settled in. But before we look at the letter itself, I want to first draw your attention to the interesting way the Book of Jeremiah identifies the recipients: (Jeremiah 29:1-2)

*[1] These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. [2] This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem.*

Verses 1-2 lead us to think of those who are receiving this letter not primarily as displaced exiles but instead as people with skills, abilities, and dignity.

Jeremiah isn't calling on a group of broken and downtrodden despondents. He knows his people better than that. He knows he's writing to men and women who were once community leaders, religious professionals, servants, government officials, craftsmen, day laborers, skilled artisans, mothers, fathers, grandparents, and a great many other vocations.

His letter is going to be read by people who have a great capacity to positively influence the world around them...and that's exactly what Jeremiah says they should do. In vv. 4-7 he says they should roll up their sleeves, commit to the place they now live...and get to work.

*[The letter] said: [4] "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: [5] Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. [6] Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. [7] But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

Jeremiah 29 ESV

In vv. 4-6 God (through the prophet Jeremiah) commands his people to do four things that likely made a lot of sense to them: build homes, do a little farming, eat your veggies, and continue to raise families and expand your community. Establish yourself in this new land, work hard and live well in Babylon just as you did in Israel.

But then, in v. 7, God gives another command, and I have to think this one might have come as a shock to the people when they first received it: "**seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you**" -- God wants his people to live and work in such a way that their presence and productivity in the places they live and with the people they encounter contributes to the overall welfare of everyone.

That word, "welfare" is a translation of the Hebrew word "*shalom*", and in this context it has rich range of meaning. God is directing his people to seek peace in their new city, to create friendships, pursue happiness, and to work hard for the well-being of all people. In his book, *Work Matters*, Tom Nelson describes the meaning of the passage in this way:

"Shalom, or peace, conveys not merely the cessation of hostility or war, but the flourishing of all God's creation. Shalom encapsulates God's brilliant design and benevolent desire for his good world. God's heart is that the city of Babylon might flourish and that his covenant people might flourish with it. Shalom is also God's desire for the people we work with, the workplaces we inhabit, and the broader society of which we are a part."

*Work Matters*, by Tom Nelson (126)

The exiles of Israel were not permitted to be obstinate, burdensome, or reclusive in their new cities. On the contrary, God specifically directs them to be engaged and participate in the prosperity of their

community. They are to put down roots, find jobs, raise families, and do good work that yields blessings for themselves and the society in which they live.

Apparently it didn't bother God in the slightest that if his people flourished it would also contribute positively to the lives of their conquerors. In fact...it seems that was part of God's design. Verse 7 makes it very clear that it was God himself who sent the people into exile, who chose for them a new home in Babylon, and that his expectation is that they now work hard for the common good of all.

And just in case you are wondering if this command to let your work bring peace and blessing to your community is isolated to this particular time and this particular place in history and in Scripture, consider this:

- When God first created Adam and Eve, and placed them in the Garden of Eden, he gave them the instructions to work hard and contribute to the growth and flourishing of all Creation
- Later in the Book of Genesis we can find the story of a man named Joseph, who after being sold into slavery worked hard to contribute to the welfare of the people around him. His life was full of incredible highs and devastating lows, but ultimately he uses his God-given skills to save both the nation of Egypt and his family from starvation during a massive famine.
- There are many, many more stories in Scripture about men and women contributing to the common good through their hard work and vocations. Craftsmen who add beautiful architecture and adornments for the temple of God. Boaz, who allows Ruth to glean from his fields, and Ruth and Naomi who work very hard to provide for themselves and contribute to the community. Queen Esther who uses a position of power that is thrust upon her to stop a genocide and lead a pagan government into moral and cultural reform.

And in the New Testament we plenty of commands that lead us as followers of Christ to understand that seeking the welfare of the people and places around us is something God expects of us, too.

In Galatians 6 Paul reminds us that we should take every opportunity to do good to for others, Christians and non-Christians alike:

Galatians 6:9–10 (ESV)

*[9] And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. [10] So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

Paul put his own words into practice when he was in Ephesus. From Acts 20 we know that while there he worked hard as a tentmaker so he wouldn't overburden the community he was discipling.

Ultimately, understanding our work as way to bless others is an extension and an application of the Great Commandment to our everyday lives:

Matthew 22:37–39 (ESV)

*[37] And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. [38] This is the great and first commandment. [39] And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

You work hard for yourself and your own well-being, which is good. You should definitely do that. Our work is meant to be a way for us to provide for ourselves and care for our loved ones. It gives us a sense of purpose and fulfillment. It does a lot of really good things in our hearts and in our lives.

But it is also meant to be something that seeks the welfare of others -- ***As a Christian, your work is meant to be a way for you to bless the people around you and the communities into which God sends you.***

Everyone here this morning has day-to-day work that they do that has the God-given potential to bless your family members, your friends, your neighbors, your business associates, clients, at even perfect strangers you may or may not get to meet. God can act through your work to bless the city of Manhattan, or Wamego, or St George, or wherever you're from.

At this point some of you are probably thinking, "Okay Sam, we get that our work can be a way we bless people and spread peace in our surroundings, but you haven't told us *how* we're supposed to pull this off. How do we teach, or farm, or go to school for the well being and common good of all?"

Here's the answer: By accepting that ***the Gospel of Jesus Christ transforms everything about your life...including the purpose of whatever it is you call work.***

In the Gospel of Matthew there is a brilliant and beautiful declaration from Jesus that I'm willing to guess very few of us have ever connected to our work life. We love to use it to fire us up for evangelism and discipleship, but I think it can have a transformative impact on our how we think about our work as well. In Matthew 5:14-16 we read,

Matthew 5:14–16 (ESV)

*[14] "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. [15] Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. [16] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."*

Verse 16 is a one-sentence-summary of the Christian life: our purpose, what God wants from us, is to do good works for others to the glory of God.

This statement absolutely applies to our acts of kindness, generosity, and service. But I believe it should apply to our work as well. Doing your work well, with honesty, integrity, and the desire to bless others as well as yourself will "let your light shine" in ways and in places that might otherwise be quite dark and devoid of any kind of witness for Christ.

Dan Cathy, the president and CEO of Chick-Fil-A, often quotes Matthew 5:16 in a different way. He replaces the phrase "good works" with a job -- and you know what? I think it's a fair way to help us see how the Gospel can revolutionize our understanding of what we are doing and who we are impacting with our work.

“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see you teach kids and give glory to your father in heaven.”

“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see you mow lawns and trim hedges and give glory to your father in heaven.”

“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see you raise children, do the laundry, keep the entire family alive...and give glory to your father in heaven.”

You and I are made to be lights in this world. Your work provides you with opportunities to do “good works” in a variety of settings that people can see and be drawn to. They can witness you working heartily, they can see you affecting the shalom of your city, your neighborhood, your family, your customers, or your clients.

And because of your good work that is seen by others, that blesses others, that encourages the people around you...opportunities for God to be glorified might also be created. They might wonder what motivates you to be an honest student, an up-front mechanic, or a cheerful waiter. They might ask you where your work ethic comes from, and you can tell them that as a Christian you believe God wants you to do good work.

You don't have to be heavy-handed about it, or attempt an inappropriate evangelistic sermon right there on the spot. But even just a simple and brief acknowledgement of the role of God in your work can be a testimony to others and a chance for him to be glorified.

God has given us the purpose of doing good work, for his glory, no matter what our work looks like. ***As Christians, our work is meant to be a way for us to bless the people around us and the communities into which God sends us.***

This week, as you go about your work, I want you to think about how God might be giving you opportunities to contribute to the well-being of the world around you.

Can you extend grace in a professional setting that is usually grace-less?

Can you affirm the dignity of people in ways that are often overlooked?

Can you do your work so well that it makes people pause to wonder why you try so hard, what motivates you, and what sets your work apart from others?

Can you be patient where others are in a hurry, be honest where other are dishonest, can you be praying for people, families, and businesses to succeed instead of just absently hoping things will turn out alright?

Give Dan Cathy's adjustment to Matthew 5:16 a try. Where will your light shine? How will you work in such a way that the glory from your effort is given to our father in heaven?

I want to leave you with two very different examples of how people I know have blessed others with the work that they do.

I'll start with my friends Ben and Rachel Motley, who own and operate Arrow Coffee Company, as well as a few other restaurant and catering businesses. Ben and Rachel are wonderful, sweet, HARD WORKING people. To all you small business owners out there...I get glimpses of your world through my friendship with the Motleys. Allow me to say a quick "thank you" for all you do and how hard you work in this city.

As much as I love being a patron of Ben and Rachel's businesses, their amazing coffee and excellent food isn't what impresses me most about what they do. What I've always admired and been humbled by is their vision for what a business should be: a way to serve people, to treat them well, and to create spaces in our communities that can be enjoyed by all. When making decisions about their businesses they don't only consider the impact on their bottom line; they also think about their customer-community and their employees as well.

Ben and Rachel love the people they hire. They really do. They try their hardest to care for the people they employ, to create opportunities for their employees to learn and grow, and are interested in their dreams and aspirations. I once overheard Ben talking about how one of the questions he asks people in interviews is what do they want to do with their lives and careers...and can working for Arrow or Pool House or help them pursue those dreams? There is a whole lot of shalom all around the personal and professional lives of Ben and Rachel, and it's because they are not in business just for a profit...their hearts are in it for people, too, for the common good.

The second story I want to share with you is about a person I won't name whose work is not what we normally think of as "work". Part of my job here at Faith is to meet with people who find themselves in need of a little help paying rent, utilities, or affording groceries till their next paycheck. Our church tries to step in and provide assistance through the use of our Compassion Fund, which you all give to from time to time...(by the way, thank you so much for that!).

While carrying out this responsibility I met a woman who needed some help, and after getting to know her a bit and learning more about her life, I found out that she receives financial assistance through the government. She has a debilitating chronic illness that makes it pretty near impossible for her to get or maintain a job.

You might be wondering, "if she's on government assistance, what exactly makes her a good example of someone whose work blesses other, or the community?"

This woman, who cannot get up and work a 9-5 like a lot of us can, spends the best hours of her day...praying for people. She's prayed for me, and for this church. She's thanked God for what we're able to do in the community and has recommended her friends visit us on a Sunday. She prays for her family, too. She tries her best to serve the people she loves by being a good mom, a good grandmother, and by being a daily prayer warrior for the people she knows and the city she lives in.

She does not make any money. But I am eternally grateful for her work. And for anyone here today that is also, for one reason or another, dependent on government-funded assistance...I want you to know that I still believe you are capable and often times engaged in good work.

You can spend the best hours of your day doing worthwhile things. For some of you it might be getting healthy so you can re-enter the workforce. For some of you that might mean being your neighborhoods best encourager, sharing smiles and words of affirmation with people who need to see a friendly face in

order to have their spirits lifted. I know many people who no longer work in the traditional sense do things like provide free childcare for their friends and family, and that is a TREMENDOUS blessing.

Maybe some of you also pray each day for the well-being of your friends, family, church, and city. All of that is indeed good work. You may not be paid for it, but I am eternally grateful for every prayer you raise up and every kindness you extend each and every day. A paycheck is not the only measure of your ability or the worth of your work.

No matter what it is that you do for work, may you all go forth this week and bless the people around you and the city you live in, for the glory of God.

### **Communion Meditation:**

It occurred to me this week, as I thought about this sermon falling on a Sunday on which we'd celebrate communion, that there is no better example of a life committed to the hard work of pursuing the well-being of others and the glory of God than that of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

God sent him here, among us, on earth, to seek the welfare of every man, woman, and child, in every city and among every tribe, tongue, and nation. And when we come to the Lord's table, remembering his body being broken for us and his blood being shed for the forgiveness of our sins we are celebrating his work -- Jesus spent the best part of his days, and his weeks, and his very life committed to the work of saving you and me. He is our light, and when we see his good work we give glory to his father, and our father, in heaven.

So as we turn to this time of communion I encourage you all to thank Jesus for his work, to seek how you might follow his example, and to give glory to God in heaven for sending Christ to seek our welfare on account of God's love.