

Faith at Work
Work and the Drama of Scripture

This morning we begin a five-week sermon series on “work.” You work is the main thing you do each week, whether you get paid to do it or not. “Work” is a broad, wide-ranging category that includes great variety and complexity. Let me give a few examples.

Where we work varies: Some of you work in the same office or building or home or shop each day. Others of you go to different job sites or even different cities in your work.

The ***type of work*** we do varies: Some of you do primarily “mental work” that primarily involves thinking and ideas. My younger brother is a math professor at a small liberal arts college near Boston. I took quite a bit of math in college, but for the life of me I can’t understand his specific area of expertise. He tells me that it has no real-life applications (yet). He does primarily mental work. Others do primarily “physical work.” This category doesn’t imply that you don’t use your mind/intellect; much physical work requires careful thought and intellectual effort. But physical work also involves creating or moving or fixing actual physical objects. Examples would be mechanics, artists, factory workers, and landscapers.

Our ***work satisfaction*** varies: Some of you have your dream job; you love going to work each day. Others of you are working a job that brings very little satisfaction; you do what you do because you need to pay the bills.

Our ***stage of life and career*** varies: Some of you are retired; you’ve made the transition from your primary career that defined how you spend the best hours of your week to a stage of life where you can decide how you spend your time each week. Some “retirees” I know are just as busy in retirement as they were when they had “paying jobs.” Others of you are preparing for your life’s work or are just entering into a career.

The ***demands of our work*** varies wildly: Some of you have relentless work demands. My wife spent fifteen years of her life at the work of raising our children. During those years I was often impressed at how much easier it was being a pastor than raising and teaching those children; I could transition from work to home life but she couldn’t.

The list could go on and on. But I mention all of this to acknowledge the complexity of what we’ll be talking about during this series. Some of the examples and illustrations we give during this series will be more relevant to you than others. In my mind that’s okay, because one of our objectives for this series is to help all of us understand and appreciate the work that ***others*** do. We’d like you to express curiosity and compassion toward others in relation to their work.

This morning we begin this series by looking at work from the perspective of ***the Drama of Scripture***. If you were here last fall, you may remember that the plot of the Bible can be summarized with four words: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration.

- Creation describes how the world **ought** to be by God's design.
 - The Fall describes how the world actually **is** due to the rebellion of Adam and Eve.
 - Redemption describes the way things **can** be because of the death and resurrection of Christ.
 - Restoration describes the way things **will** be when God makes all things new.
- Hopefully today's message will establish some foundational perspectives that will give us a grid for thinking about our work and the work of others.

Creation: *God created us to do meaningful work (i.e., the creation mandate). (Genesis 1:27-28, 2:15)*

For our purposes this morning, the thing I want us to notice from the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 is that God had **meaningful work** for Adam to do before "the Fall." Work has always been part of God's original design. From the beginning God designed us to be creative and productive.

In Genesis 1:27 we read that humanity was created in God's image and given responsibility over the rest of creation. This is sometimes called the creation mandate.

27 God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. 28 God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

As His image-bearers, they were to "subdue" or "exercise dominion" (ESV) over the earth. This command reflects the perspective that God is the Lord/King over all of creation and that we are his "royal stewards" (Chris Wright, p. 34) who have the responsibility of ruling over creation in a way that's compatible with our Creator King. God's original vision was for Eden to be expanded throughout the entire earth.

From the very beginning we see that God has a bias for collaboration and participation with His image-bearers. God could have created in such a way that all humanity wouldn't have a thing to do or accomplish; He could have created this earth in such a way that it didn't need care and cultivation and stewardship. But He didn't. When He created humanity in His image, He gave us the desire and the ability to do meaningful work.

We see something similar in the complementary creation account in Genesis 2. In verse 15 we read about the assignment God gave "the man."

15 Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.

We were not created to be idle and unproductive. Work is not a necessary evil; it is an expression of being made in the image of God. The creation account in Genesis 1 depicted God working for six days, bringing creation from being "formless and void" to being "very good." Being made in God's image, we continue to bring order to the

created world. The 4th commandment in Exodus 20:8-11 not only commanded Israel to rest on the 7th day; it included a command to work for 6 days. In this way they were to imitate God who **worked** six days and rested on the seventh.

The first man's work primarily involved agriculture. He was put in the garden of Eden to **cultivate it**. Moses uses a word that can be translated serve, cultivate, work, or even worship. Adam was to take the raw materials of the garden and improve it, making it even more beautiful and productive.

Isn't it interesting that in its pristine condition, the garden still needed to be cultivated/ worked? Even though God's creation was "very good" there was a role for the man to develop and "improve" it. In fellowship with God, this would be a delightful work. The man could use his God-given creativity and imagination for agriculture, landscaping, artistic expression, etc. This is a foundational verse that establishes the goodness of "work."

In a couple minutes we'll notice how "the fall" affects our work. But we need to understand and believe that God created us to work, to co-labor with Him in this world. Granted that we all need a break from our work (regular sabbath and vacations and such), but the ideal for humanity is not being idle and unproductive. This is one reason why unemployment (and underemployment) is so demoralizing. When you're not gainfully employed you not only have the stress of not having an income; you also have the frustration of not being able to make a contribution through your work. One aspect of being created in the image of God involves a desire and ability to make positive contributions to the world around us.

Fall: *Workers are sinful and work is toilsome. (Genesis 3:17-19)*

In the Garden, God had abundantly supplied food to eat; it was simply there for the taking. In the creation account the ground was blessed by God so that it produced good fruit (1:11, 2:9). That changed after Adam and Eve sinned. Sin had a pervasive effect in God's good creation. Just as the woman would have pain in childbirth, the man would experience hardship in cultivating the ground. In Genesis 3 we read this:

17 Then to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it';

Cursed is the ground because of you;

In toil you will eat of it

All the days of your life.

18 "Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;

And you will eat the plants of the field;

19 By the sweat of your face

You will eat bread,

Till you return to the ground,

Because from it you were taken;

For you are dust,

And to dust you shall return.”

Because of the fall, the ground would only grudgingly yield food. Weeds (thorns and thistles) would frustrate him in his work of cultivating the ground. Consequently, producing food/bread would be a hard, sweaty process until the day he died. By implication, *all work would be toilsome*.

In Romans 8:21 Paul looks back to this very passage. There he declares that “creation was subjected to futility” and is now enslaved to corruption. This doesn’t imply that creation is sinful; rather creation experiences the effects of humanity’s sin. Even though creation declares the glory of God in amazing ways, creation is neither what it was *designed to be* nor what it *will be* when all things are made new.

For many, work is now a four-letter word. Instead of being a joyful collaboration between God and His people, work is now full of strife and frustration. After the fall, ***workers are sinful and work is toilsome***.

You don’t have to think very long to notice ways that sin affects the workplace.

- * We bring our fears and anxieties and insecurities to work with us. We bring our jealousy and anger to work.
- * For some, work becomes an idol; they sacrifice family and health and even their relationship with God for their work . . . On the other end of the spectrum is slothfulness (cutting corners and doing the bare minimum instead of being full of integrity and generosity).
- * Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. One of the injustices Dr. King spoke against was racial discrimination in the workplace. Our laws have changed, but the human heart remains the same.
- * My Jewish mother remembers a sign outside a restaurant in Chattanooga, TN in the 1950s that read, “No dogs or Jews allowed.” Imagine the culture of ***that*** workplace.
- * The past few years the reality of sexual harassment in the workplace been documented and exposed.

The list could go on and on. Because of the fall, work is full of strife and frustration and evil.

Redemption. *The gospel transforms us and our approach to work.*

We won’t spend much time on this point today because the rest of this sermon series will explore ways that the gospel transforms us and informs the way we think about our work. One passage we’ll consider is in Colossians 3. There Paul gives a striking command to followers of Christ who were also slaves. Slavery in the Roman Empire varied in degrees of cruelty and oppression; but at the end of the day slaves were not free. None of them had their dream job.

23 Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.

Because they were followers of Christ, they didn't have the option of saying, "Because we are being treated unfairly, we have no obligation to do our work well." Followers of Christ are to treat others the way Christ has treated them. This would involve demonstrating forgiveness, sacrifice, generosity, and humility in their work. That's just one example of the way the gospel transforms a person and the way s/he approaches work.

The topics we'll cover the next four weeks are:

- January 27 - *Serving Christ through Our Work*
- February 3 - *The Dignity of Work*
- February 10 - *Work and Spiritual Formation*
- February 17 - *Affirming the Work of Others*

Hopefully during this series each of us will develop convictions - biblical convictions - that form the way we think about work (ours and others').

I'd actually like to give you an assignment for next week: formulate a description of your work (the main thing you do) in terms of its **value**. . . or in terms of what your work actually accomplishes.

- One way to describe my work as a pastor is: *I preach sermons, go to meetings, and talk with people*. A better description might be: *I help people hear and believe the voice of God*.
- Another person might say: *I clean houses*. A better description might be: *I help bring order and health to the spaces where people live*.

If you would, between now and next Sunday ponder how to describe your work in terms of its value.

Restoration. *We will fulfill our creation mandate in the new heaven and earth.*

When Christ returns God will fully establish His kingdom here on earth. When Christ returns those who know Him will experience **full spiritual transformation** and will be given a **resurrected body** similar to Jesus' resurrection body. In other words, our salvation will extend even to our bodies.

Since all of creation was affected by the fall, all of creation must be fully redeemed. God's plan of redemption involves fully restoring **everything** that was lost at the fall (and then some)! We talked about this last November 4th in the last message about the "drama of Scripture." Revelation 21 and 22 describe "a new heaven and a new earth" coming down out of heaven. Basically John describes a place like the Garden of Eden. There will be "the tree of life" for the healing of the nations. Just as in the original Garden, God will dwell among His people. The main difference is that there is no serpent and no possibility of sin.

But what will we do there? I think we can safely say that the common stereotype is wrong; we will not be lounging around on clouds and eating donuts all day. We will have resurrected bodies like Jesus had when He appeared to the disciples. He could walk and talk and eat. And we will be living **here** in the new heaven and earth. We aren't told

as much as we might like to know about what exactly we'll be doing; but what we are told is very intriguing.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 6 Paul is aghast that the believers in Corinth were taking each other to court in front of unbelievers instead of settling the disagreements "in house." In order to impress upon them they should have the wisdom and the spiritual maturity to settle such disputes, Paul says (almost off the cuff):

3 Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more matters of this life?

People understand this differently. I tend to think these are the angels who have been given authority over the nations (v. 2 speaks of the saints judging "the world"); but they could be other fallen angels. Whatever the case, Paul is saying that since they will judge greater spiritual beings in the next life, they should be able to settle their disagreements in this life. Their future was supposed to press back in on the present.

The book of Revelation gives this same impression, that we will have great responsibility in the new heaven and new earth. Revelation 5 records that John saw a vision in which all the heavenly creatures and the humans bowing down to the Lamb who was slain.

9 And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. 10 "You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth."

Verse 9 is about Jesus; verse 10 is about His people. Two things are said about those from every tribe and tongue and people and nation who had been redeemed by the Lamb. First, Jesus has made them/us to be a kingdom and priests to our God. Second, "**they will reign upon the earth.**" Revelation 20:4 speaks of believers being resurrected and reigning with Christ for a thousand years. Revelation 22:5 says that they "will reign forever and ever." My understanding is that this is a restatement of the creation mandate in Genesis 1:28, "exercise dominion" over the earth and "rule over" every living creature.

Honestly I'm just beginning to formulate my thinking on this topic of what we'll do when God restores all things. But I'm drawn toward **this vision of redeemed, resurrected humanity fulfilling our creation mandate.** It seems to me that "reigning upon the earth" involves "cultivating and keeping" the new earth in ways that are completely compatible with the will of God. Imagine cultivating land and creating cultures with no sin and no serpent (no resistance to the will of God). All of this suggests that we will have no shortage of meaningful, satisfying work when God makes all things new.

We are told all of these things so that our future presses back into the present. We seek to serve God in this life in a way that's compatible with the next. That surely includes our work. I hope you can be here next week as we talk about serving God through our work.