

Faith at Work
Affirming the Work of Others

Today we are going to wrap up our sermon series on the topic of work. We've described work as "the main thing you do each week whether or not you get paid for it." We've talked about how work fits into the drama of Scripture (we were created to work), how we can love God and love our neighbors through out work, and how God refines us through our work. Based on the things we've discussed the past four Sundays, I hope to cast a vision for engaging and affirming the work of others. This will involve things like:

- Being genuinely interested in others' work.
- Talking with others about their work, asking questions and making helpful observations.
- Praying about others' work.

Engaging and affirming others' work is important for at least three reasons. First, it will be helpful for ***you*** to learn about the work of others. For example, you might find it helpful to realize that every type of work has its stresses and strains; that's a reality of living in a fallen world. Seeing the way another person perseveres and trusts God might help you persevere in your workplace.

A few weeks ago I mentioned that our pastoral team is doing workplace visits. This is an opportunity for us to see you in your work environment. You (hopefully) see us in our area of competence here at Faith; but as pastors we rarely see you in your areas of competence. This provides such an opportunity. I did a workplace visit this past week that involved lunch, a lecture, and part of a lab. It was good for me to see someone who is passionate about his work and eager to train students for a lifetime of service. That workplace visit confirmed for me some important things about my work.

Second, it will be helpful/encouraging to ***others*** when you notice and affirm their work. At one time or another most of us wonder whether or not our work matters - if our work is really honoring God and making a difference in this world. It is rather rare to have another person slow down, notice, and affirm their work; if you engage a person's work, it very well might have a significant impact. In other words, this is a tangible way to express love to that person.

Third, if this habit of engaging and affirming the work of others becomes commonplace among us, it has the potential to change the ***culture of Faith*** in some significant, positive ways. If we embody the things we are going to talk about today we will increasingly become a more humble, compassionate, and courage-giving people. That is no small thing!

Here's what we're going to do in this message: we are going to explore how affirming the work of others can be an application of some core relational commands in Scripture. We'll look at a few Scriptures and then think about how we might apply those Scriptures in the context of others' work. I am going to urge you to widen your view of work beyond "me and mine."

Today's Big Idea: ***Numerous Scriptures urge us to be interested in and thoughtful about the details of others' lives. These Scriptures can prompt us to notice and affirm the work of others.***

Look out for the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4)

Paul's basic definition of humility involve taking our eyes off of ourselves and considering the needs of others.

3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Paul tells what a humble person ***doesn't*** do and what a humble person ***does*** do. If you're humble you don't merely look out for your own personal interests. Rather, you look out for (pay attention to, are concerned about) the interests of others (the things that really matter in their lives).

In the context of this sermon series, a humble person doesn't merely say, "All I care about is whether or not I love God and serve my neighbors through my work." Rather, a humble person says, "Because I regard others as important (even more important than myself), I also look out for their interests. I care about whether or not others love God and their neighbors through their work." You can't express this type of humility toward everybody, but you can toward at least a few.

I've told you before about the pastor Brenda and I talked with before going off to seminary in 1985. When we asked him what makes a good pastor, one of the things he told us was, "You've got to make people ***think*** you care about them." I walked out of there thinking, "God, deliver me from ever becoming that person." In Philippians 2:3-4 Paul doesn't say, "Make people ***think*** you care about them and their personal interests." He says we should actually ***care*** about others; we should actually look out for their interests.

A very simple, core way we can do this is by caring about the work that others do. A simple expression of humility is to notice the work of others, be interested in what they're doing and how they're doing it, and care whether or not they're loving God and loving others through their work.

I'd encourage you to begin by being interested in the work of those closest to you - your spouse, roommate, close friends, etc. - and branch out from there. Sometimes we take for granted those closest to us, especially in the context of work. I dare say that some of you here today feel very much unnoticed and unappreciated in relation to your work. It would be a real gift if those closest to you would take a genuine interest in the work you do. This week have conversations with those closest to you about their work; get below the surface and hear how they really think and feel about their work; pray for each other in the context of their work.

In case you need help with such conversations, I've listed some questions at the bottom of the sermon outline in your bulletin (also at the end of this document). Asking these types of question will likely help the other person think about their work in ways they might not have considered; and you will probably learn some important things about that person and his/her work experience. In other words, the relationship (whether it's a marriage or a friendship) will likely deepen; that's because genuine humility draws people closer.

Treat others the way you want to be treated. (Matthew 7:12): Toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives a very simply, yet profound principle that should govern how treat others. It's often called "the golden rule."

12 "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

If you want a summary of how the Hebrew Scriptures advocate treating others, this is it. As He did throughout His teachings, Jesus inverts the way we normally think and act. We normally think, "I am going to treat others the way they treat me," or "I am going to treat others the way they deserve to be treated." If somebody insults me, I'm going to insult them in return or (at best) ignore them. Instead, Jesus tells us to consider, "How would I want to be treated if I were in this situation?" If I wouldn't want to be insulted or belittled, I shouldn't treat others that way.

We can live out the golden rule in many different ways and in many different contexts. For example, in your friendships ask the question, "How do I want my friends to treat me or relate to me?" However you answer that question, that's how you treat them. The perspective is "Be the friend you want."

For our purposes this morning, ask the question, "How do I want others to treat me in relation to my work?" Most of us would say, "I want others to notice what I do. I want them to value what I do. I want others to affirm me in my work." That being the case, we should notice and value and affirm the work that others do.

Again, I would encourage you to begin with the people closest to you: those you live with, your coworkers, and your friends. Begin engaging and affirming their work the way you would want them to engage and affirm your work.

You can also notice, value, and affirm the work of those in the community that serve you. This past week I had a regular appointment with my eye doctor. He informed me that he's moving out of state this year. For the past 15+ years he's been my eye doctor. I've got some unique issues with my eyes that he really understands. I was able to express to him how his care for me all these years has really given me peace of mind and improved my quality of life (I wasn't quite that eloquent on the spot). It was good for me to express these things; and I think it was good for him to hear them. I was genuinely thankful, so I expressed it to him.

The point is that we don't have to make things up. We just have to notice others' work and then treat them the way we want to be treated.

Spur one another on to love and good deeds. (Hebrews 10:23–25)

In Hebrews 10 we have a cluster of commands that is very familiar to many of us. But I wonder how often we actually do what the author of Hebrews urges. He first gives a command to cling to the truth of the gospel.

23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful;

The faithfulness of God is the core core of our confidence. If God weren't faithful to do what He's promised we wouldn't have any reason for confidence. We would have to live our lives believing that our future is dependent upon circumstances or chance or luck or fate. Instead, we look confidently to the future because God is faithful to do what He's promised.

24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

The command here is to spend time considering things you might say and do that would influence others to love better and to do good deeds. Implicit in this command is the conviction that God actually wants you to influence other people's behavior. I don't know if you've ever owned this responsibility. But imagine what a local church would be like if each of us were able to say from the heart, "God expects me to do and say things that will help others have greater motivation and resolve to show love and engage in good deeds. What God expects He also empowers. God will empower me to influence others to do the will of God." You can't do this with everybody, but you can do this with a few.

Notice as well the warning against "forsaking our own assembling together." When a person quits gathering with other believers - whether in corporate worship or Bible study or simply in spiritual friendships - s/he is no longer in a position to be influenced by them. In light of our time in history (the day of the Lord is drawing near; we are living in the last chapter of history before the consummation of all things), we should encourage one another all the more. At the heart of encouragement is "coming alongside" others to help them walk with God.

Think about how we might learn how to provide this type of encouragement to one another in the context of our work. One of the emphases of this series is that our work provides an opportunity to love God and love our neighbors. Sometimes people have a hard time recognizing why their work matters and how their work promotes the common good. If you have a mind to do so, consider how you might help other people love God and love their neighbors through their work.

One of the initiatives we will be rolling out this Fall involves seeing God raise up affinity groups for various types of work. The format could differ from group to group. You might meet once a month or every other month with others in your general area of work, perhaps over lunch or perhaps at the end of the day. You would talk about issues you face in your work; you would talk about how to love God and love others through your work. You could pray for each other in ways that only people in your line of work understand. You could have an affinity group for teachers, for stay-at-home moms, for medical professions, for building trades, for small business owners, for people in financial fields, for those who are “retired,” etc.

Personally I’ve benefitted greatly from affinity groups as a pastor. Our pastoral staff here at Faith provides one such group; we regularly talk about our work as pastors and what God is teaching us. I also meet regularly with a group of pastors here in town. Next week I’ll be out in Boulder for two days for Team 500, an affinity group of senior pastors who serve E Free churches about our size. We show up without any pre-set agenda. The first meeting we have about a half hour to write on big poster board sized sticky notes the things on our hearts and minds - issues we’re facing, what’s working and what’s not, “dumb tax,” “den of thieves,” etc. We spend two days sitting in a room talking about our work as pastors. Sounds riveting, huh. . . It’s one of the most edifying and thought-provoking couple days of my year.

There’s usually a pastor or two who is on the verge of quitting. We do the very things we’ve been talking about this morning: we notice each others’ pain, we care about their well-being, and we pray bold, faith-filled prayers. I leave that meeting every year with the sense that I’ve been with people who really “get” the issues I face in my work. It’s very nourishing and sometimes healing.

We would love for you to have this same type of experience in relation to your work. I would ask you to think about pray about what it might mean for you to have this type of affinity group comprised of people that really “get” what you do and who are committed to helping you love God and love others through your work. If you want to be part of such a group relevant to your work, we will try to resource you and encourage you. You don’t have to wait until the fall; let us know if you want to start a group sooner. This type of encouragement and “spurring one another on” in relation to our work should be commonplace, not the exception.

Conclusion. This is the last message in this series on work. But this series is meant to begin an ongoing conversation on workplace theology. If workplace theology is going to be part of the culture of Faith - something we care about and talk about and affirm - we will need to internalize the perspectives we’ve been discussing the past 4 weeks.

I’ve listed some resources at the bottom of your outline (also below). There you’ll find three excellent books on workplace theology and an organization based in KC, Made to Flourish. If you go to their web site you’ll find all sorts of articles and blogposts about work.

Workplace Questions:

How would you describe your work?

What do you like best about your job/career?

What are the most challenging/frustrating aspects of your work?

What are some ways that you do your work “as to the Lord”?

How do you “love your neighbor” through your work?

How can I pray for you in relation to your work?

Books:

Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work by Tim Keller

Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work by Tom Nelson

Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good by Amy Sherman

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