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for a long while

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Why Should We Want to Work?

Part 1 of our teaching series on "Seeing our 'work' Biblically"
Genesis 2:1-3 & 15

Every year there are one or two teaching series that God puts on my heart **more passionately** than the other sermon series – and believe me I get excited about all of them. This is one of those series, which is why I have been telling you since the fall how excited I am that we are doing it. **What you don't know is that God has been working on this topic in me for decades!** So much so, that over 30 years ago I wanted to write a book on this topic – I even came up with some rough chapters.

Lord willing, we are going to take the next six or seven weeks to look at this **area of work** from God's perspective. **My goal is nothing less than the transformation of how we view work as Christians.** Now when I say "**work**", I am not just talking about paid jobs. **Work refers to any effort that we put out to accomplish a goal.** It excludes play, rest, hobbies and leisure.

- Chores around the house? ... they are all work
- If you are in school? ... paying attention, reading, and doing your homework ... those are all work
- If you are retired ... the extra effort that it takes you to do simple things like putting on your clothes, making your meals, getting from one place to another, personal grooming and other necessary efforts to keep going ... they are all work.
- **All that we do to serve Jesus ... is work** – from teaching a Sunday school class to taking our turn in nursery. So whether we are helping others do something, cleaning the church, helping out in ministries or going out of your way to befriend new people ... we are doing work.
- **Raising kids, working out the budget, paying the bills, straightening up the house, mowing the grass, that's all work.**
- And of course, what we do at our paid jobs is work, whether that is full-time or part-time.

We will spend more time working than we will do anything else in life, including sleep, because **work is all the effort we put forth to provide for our life, serve the Lord, help others and care for our family.** So **work** is one of the most important areas for us to understand Biblically. Jesus wants our faith to transform our perspective of work. **Yet so often, our attitude about work comes from our culture, our old nature, or the lies of the devil rather than from the Word and plan of God.** That is where we are headed the next six or seven weeks. Let me start with my own story, so you can better know where I am coming from.

PROPOSITION: All work has value because when we work we reflect and imitate Almighty God.

I. Pastor Neal's "work" background

A. Started working young (learned diligence & hard work)



Both my parents were very hard workers, both at home and in their jobs. I was given chores to do to help the family as early as I can remember. In grade school, I started to do some odd jobs for money, including taking care of pets when people were on vacation. My parents pushed me to work hard in school and put a lot of work into my homework. I was generally not allowed to quit something I had started until I had put a great deal of time and effort into it. I remember my brother and I spending time every week for a whole year to painstakingly grind a concave glass mirror to the perfection needed to be a 6" telescope mirror. We had to do tons of work in Cub Scouts & Boy Scouts for our awards, service projects, fund raising and monthly campouts (*yes I have slept out many nights in the snow in just a small pup tent*). In Junior High, I got my first regularly paying job as a caddy carrying clubs for people at a golf course. I even got to caddy once for a person on the pro-circuit. It was when I was a sophomore in High School that I finally got old enough to work at a wider range of jobs. I would spend up to 30 hours a week during High School making pizzas and later being manager of the place on certain nights. So from a very early age, hard work was modeled, encouraged, and experienced.

B. Variety of jobs (learned many skills & to be satisfied in whatever job he had)

This work ethic helped me have a continual stream of jobs, which I generally only left when I moved or my life situation changed. Not all of these were paid, some were regular volunteer positions – Besides caddying & pizza making, I was a professional carpet cleaner, camp counselor, maintenance man, helped with haying on a farm, led lots of bike, canoe & white water rafting trips, ran a food service for men's house at the University, mopped floors, was a chaplain, worked at a grocery store, did teaching, and finally became a computer programmer when I moved to Vermont. I was fortunate to have such a wide variety of jobs – from those that were fun to those that were very repetitive; blue collar jobs to a white collar one; I got to be at the bottom and also manage; some paid less than minimum wage to being paid more. This wide variety of jobs taught me many skills, exposed me to a whole host of people & problems and gave me opportunities to learn to lead and follow. But it did something else. God used this variety to teach me NOT to seek my value or worth from my pay job, but simply put strong effort and creativity into each job I did to accomplish the goals *Not that I don't get really frustrated at times and regularly want to quit*, but overall, I learned to be satisfied in whatever job I was in, I didn't expect the job to fulfill me but always saw at least one value in each job that was allowing me to join God in His work. My favorite complement was when I had dropped down to permanent part-time at National Life. One day when I wasn't there, someone asked my co-workers, "*Where's Neal?*" "*Oh, he's off doing his real job*" – referring to me trying to start this church.

C. Bi-vocational pastor (learned to honor Jesus equally in both 'sacred' and 'secular' worlds)

Which brings me to a final lesson God taught me. Because I was bi-vocational for 8 years – meaning I worked as a computer programmer at National Life AND SIMULTANEOUSLY I was a pastor trying to start a new Bible-believing church in

Barre, I had the privilege to work in both the “sacred” and the “secular” worlds at the same time. And what I learned was that I could honor Jesus EQUALLY in both worlds. A sacred job – like pastor, missionary or para-church worker – is not higher or more valuable than a secular job – like cooking, cleaning & programming. ~~When I tell you that you are more valuable to the work of God in this area than I am, I mean it.~~

D. Still had a very utilitarian view of work

Yet despite all these good lessons God had taught me about work, I still had some fairly messed up views Biblically – especially in seeing work in just a utilitarian way. If I was honest with myself, I saw work as a “*necessary evil*”. In fact, I use to tell people that my goal was “**a 52-week paid vacation**” every year. I saw retirement as the time to just play and do what you wanted. I saw work during the week as something you did so you could be free for the weekend. And I saw work as a necessary evil to provide the funds to live life, take care of your family, and help others.

II. Different Christian views of how to serve God in work

(list compiled by Tim Keller)

My many years of life have shown me many other diligent faithful followers of Jesus are a lot like me. On one hand they have learned valuable and Biblical perspectives about work. Yet, like me, they have other attitudes towards work that are selfish, unrealistic, worldly and definitely the opposite of God’s plan. So in this series, there will be some things I share that you are already doing. Let those things encourage you and reinforce what you are doing well. Great job – keep it up! But there will be other things I share which you are NOT regularly doing or thinking. Let yourselves be challenged by these areas because they can positively change your perspective, attitude and actions.

Part of the reason that we all have different lessons we have personally learned about work, is because there are simply more aspects to God’s plan for work than we generally realize. Just consider the simple question “**How should you serve the Lord in your paying job?**” In your outline, you will see a list of 8 very different answers that Pastor Tim Keller has compiled.

- A. The way to serve God at work is to be personally honest and evangelize your colleagues. What he is referring to here is that we honor God by representing His moral values at work and by clearly sharing the gospel with our co-workers as we have opportunities.
- B. The way to serve God at work is just to do skillful, excellent work
Here we honor God by the way we conscientiously do our work
- C. The way to serve God at work is to further social justice in the world
The stress here is to honor God by seeking the welfare of other people – we look for ways to use our work to help others.

- D. The way to serve God at work is to work with a grateful, joyful, gospel-changed heart through all the ups and downs
 Here, we honor God by approaching work with a different attitude than those around us. We show Jesus' transformation IN our lives by our outward attitudes, especially in tough & trying situations.
- E. The way to serve God at work is to create beauty
 This one is most applicable to those who are in the arts or creative type jobs. We honor God by creatively reflecting the beauty of God and His creation in what we do, thus bringing beauty and hope through our work.
- F. The way to serve God at work is to work from a Christian motivation to glorify God, seeking to engage **and** influence culture to that end
 Here we want to use our work to help restore the values of God and the Bible to our surrounding culture – from our work unit to the world.
- G. The way to serve God at work is to do whatever gives you the greatest joy and passion
 I struggle saying something positive about this one, because I see so much selfishness that comes out of it as I observe people. But if we are not seeking our own happiness, I do believe we can honor God by recognizing and then using the gifts that God has given us which are sometimes seen by our passion and joy of doing something.
- H. The way to serve God at work is to make as much money as you can, so that you can be as generous as you can
 Here, one honors God through generosity made possible by one's work. They can financially help the church, Christian missions and those hurting in very significant ways, others can not.

Generally, any specific Christian book, seminar or teaching lesson focus on just one or two of these. In fact, you'll notice that I underlined the first word "**the**" – "**The way**". When stated this way, each sounds like it should be the one, overarching reason – that if you just implement this one than you have properly brought Jesus and your faith into the your work. But when you look at each of these as an exclusive reason for how to serve God at work, then you will notice that some actually minimize or contradict others. All 8 can't be "**The way.**" But if you put an "A" in place of the "The", we then have 8 very different directions "to work on" regarding honoring God in our jobs, retirement or schoolwork.

III. God works

Gen 2:1-3

So let's go back to the beginning, *literally the beginning of the universe*, to learn about God's view of work. You've been very patient to wait this long for us to look into our passage here in Genesis 2.

A. Among the first things we learn of God is that He works

Gen 2:1-3; 1:1; 2:15

READ Gen 2:1-3. Notice v 1 **READ.** Now go back to Gen 1:1 **READ.** In the beginning, God created the whole Universe, life and humanity. Now at the beginning of chapter 2, that initial creating is finished. So what does God call this effort? “Work”! Three times in Gen 2:1-3, God calls His effort work. **“By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing.”** Among the very first things we learn about God in the Bible is that He works. So when we work, we are reflecting God. In fact, when you look down at Gen 2:15, you’ll see that God specifically designed us to work long before sin entered the world. **READ 2:15.** When we work, we reflect our Maker. ***Does it matter what work we are doing?*** No! If it isn’t “*illegitimate work*” such as “gambling”, “prostitution”, “extortion” and other unbiblical efforts, then any of our work can be imitating what God does.

Think about that for a moment. Imagine a dull job you have to do – the “*why do I have to do this*” kind of job - maybe cleaning the toilet, sweeping the floor, picking up trash, doing endless worksheets at school, taking 30 minutes to get dressed because of your body is failing or filling out some time-consuming, required forms that no one is going to look at – in all these boring, often frustrating tasks, **you are reflecting God.** We reflect the Lord when we put effort or energy into accomplishing a task, whatever the task is. (*Now if we slack off or grumble while doing it, we are not reflecting God!*) Isn’t that an incredible thought – AND so transforming when we begin to look at our efforts like God looks at them. And this is true whether it is “normal work” or “religious work”. ***Work reflects our perfect God who designed us!***

So it would be wrong for us to label some jobs as “**menial**” while considering other work “**prestigious**”. It is true that the outcome of our work will be different, but the work itself has similar value because we are imitating God. It would also be unbiblical to picture work as a “**necessary evil**” or put in a lot of effort to avoid work or to spend our whole life accumulating, so we don’t have to work anymore but just play. As we will see down the road, these false perspectives actually lead to a diminished life and a whole bunch of problems. We can also be very confident that we will ALL have work to do in the new heavens and new earth in the future. It is true in this lifetime, if God grants us a long life, we will all probably retire from jobs, but we will never retire from doing work.

B. He does a lot of work

Gen 2:2-3; John 5:17

So in the beginning of the Bible, not only do we learn that God works, but we also learn that work is something we will do a lot of. **READ Gen 2:2-3.** When compared to our earthly week, God worked six out of the seven days. That is a majority of the week – more than our culture currently does. And God didn’t stop working then, for Jesus tells us in John 5:17 “**My Father is always at His work to this very day and I too am working.**” So work was not a necessary evil that came after sin entered the world, nor is it something we should spend energy trying to avoid, but work is something that we will do a majority of each week. Work is so fundamental to us as

humans, that it is one of the few things in life we can take in significant amounts without it harming us. Again, this includes all the work we do not just our paying jobs.

What an incredible perspective of work – God works and He does a lot of it – in fact a 6 to 1 ratio. No wonder being a couch potato is so numbing and enslaving to those who do it for extended time. We are made to work. *(By the way, we are NOT called to work endlessly as this passage clearly shows in the illustration of the 7th day rest. Proper rest and breaks from work are as essential as work itself to reflect God, but we won't tackle that area until February.)*

It is important for any who cannot work a regular job, because they are handicapped or old, to regularly put effort into things ...starting with caring for themselves as much as they can, serving Jesus and helping others. Mary was an older woman in our church who became a Christian at 75 years of age. Her body continued to break down so she had to be in a wheelchair - it is the one you see me running around in today. She never had much formal education. Between her broken body, feeling she was such a new Christian and lack of education, Mary didn't believe that she could do anything meaningful for the Lord. Yet, she became one of our greatest assets here because she took time every week to call all those people who were serving that Sunday as nursery, preschool, Junior Church, cleaners or greeters. When you have a responsibility only once every month or two, there are a number who forget! What she did was invaluable and allowed this church to function at a much higher level than we would have otherwise. And she could encourage people when she called. We all have "work to do" for the Lord. When we actually do things and not just think about them, then that work itself reflects God.

C. God's work accomplished things

Gen 2:1, 3

So God works - we reflect the Lord when we work. God works a lot – we humans were created to work a lot, it is part of how God designed us.

The third thing we see in this short passage is that God's work accomplished things. **READ v 1, 3b.** God's work created this whole universe, in its vast array – the heavens and the earth – from scratch no less! **Now that is accomplishing things.** Work is not just effort – it is effort towards a goal. So there is great value IN our work as we reflect God – but there is also great value that COMES OUT of our work because of what we accomplish. So it is very important that AS WE WORK, we keep our eyes on the goal of our work or we will be tempted to make other things like "fun" or "easy" or "no problems" become our goal. That will keep us from accomplishing much, which will be very frustrating and demotivating long term.

Accomplishing something through work is just as much a human need as food, water love, faith and friendships. Because my Muscular Dystrophy is getting worse, it now takes me 4 times as long, and a lot more effort, just to get ready & eat breakfast each day. If I focus on what I can't do or how much longer it takes or how hard it is to do

what used to be so simple, then I feel defeated – I don't feel whole or useful. Because I have taken my eyes off what IS accomplished. But if I see all my extra effort as **work reflecting God** and **accomplishing something** – I did get ready for the day – there is a very different attitude inside. There is value to my day and a value to my efforts because something did get accomplished. Work that produces something is essential to ALL of us.

That is why I am so proud of people like Jay and Barbara Belding who have developed a company called **Associated Production Services** just to train and employ people with special needs – people who have a great deal of trouble getting and keeping jobs in other companies. It is basically assembly line work for other companies. They have 480 people working there – they have optimized things so the employees can provide a quality product, participate in regular work and help pay their own way. **We all have an intrinsic need to produce something**. Ask those in nursing homes and hospitals how they are doing and one of the regrets you will hear is that they wish they had something to do which would be useful to others. They have too much leisure and not enough work that is accomplishing something. We don't just need the money from paid work to survive, we need the work itself (*very much including our chores*) to live fully human lives!

D. God did good work

Gen 1:31

Time is quickly going so let me briefly touch on this last sub-point. God does **good work** – really good work. **READ Gen 1:31**. God works and the results are really good. In fact, the wonder of creation is still one of the strongest evidences that there is a God ... and that is after the corruption of sin! **Now the Bible's account of creation is very different from how other ancient cultures described how the world began**. Many, if not most, ancient cultures describe creation as a result of fighting between the gods. But in the Bible, creation is not the aftermath of the battle but **the plan of the craftsman**. There is an incredible amount of detail, intricate design and thought put into creation. So when we put extra effort, creativity, planning and thought into our work, we are fulfilling who we were created to be. Don't make your goal fame, fortune or feeling in any of your work. But realize that extra effort you do in cleaning hidden areas, overcoming frustrations, finding better ways to do something or making the effort to appreciate co-workers – all those things are reflecting and imitating how the perfect God works – and He is pleased!

Conclusion

During seminary, my pastor retired. So a couple of us took several days off to move he and his wife from the Chicagoland area to his new condo in Minneapolis, MN – about an 8 hour drive. One of my jobs was to drive his car and wife as she didn't feel comfortable driving that far and he was driving the moving truck. It didn't take me long to realize she did not want to move. She did not want to set up a new house, she did not want to have to unpack everything again. She was in a very bad mood and nothing I said cheered her up ... until we started talking about my jobs during seminary. I mopped grocery store floors every morning and several afternoons, I

professionally cleaned houses for a company called "Servicemaster". Since that was like the housework she was dreading, she asked how much I made there. I said I only made 30% of what they charged for my time. **"Well, how much do they charge, if you clean a bathroom?"** **"\$18 an hour and I got about 5 ½ dollars an hour."** "How much do they charge if you do the living room or kitchen?" **"If we bring in our own heavy duty equipment like vacuum cleaners or floor scrubbers it is \$24 an hour."** For the next hour, she just kept repeating & confirming those numbers which would be like \$40 and \$55 an hour today. When we got to Minneapolis, she immediately went over to her husband and said **"Harold, do you know how much I'm worth?"** He wisely answered, **"You're worth everything to me, honey."** **"No, you know how much my cleaning is worth?"** He had no idea what was going on. Using our more modern figures now **"I'm worth \$40 an hour and \$55 when I use the vacuum cleaner."** She then tore into the task of cleaning that Condo like a tornado. You have never seen a more motivated person. And the only thing that changed ... was her perspective. That's our privilege as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. How do YOU view the work YOU do? Let's continue our challenge next Sunday during worship. We'll also discuss the principles we shared today and how they apply in specific areas next Sunday during our Adult Sunday School time at 9:30! (Lord help us be encouraged, especially by work we do in our homes and jobs which others look down on – because You certainly don't!)