

## A Biblical View of Work

This is Labor Day weekend, a weekend we celebrate work. So, I thought it might be appropriate this morning to look at a biblical view of work, which among other things, teaches us that part of what it means to be Human is to be able to work. From the beginning Men and Women were created to be workers. Eden was paradise, but not because of an absence of work. *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it* (Genesis 2:15). Part of what made Eden a paradise was the work our first parents were given to do. They cared for the creation. / What gardener wouldn't thrill at the invitation to care for Eden? / What gamesmen wouldn't thrill to care for the herds and flocks of Eden. What farmer wouldn't thrill to plant and 'til and harvest the produce of Eden.

Even more than being a worker, / in Eden man was a co-worker with God. God created, Adam cultivated. Work was a picture of the ideal relationship between man and God. Man was created / not to be an idle recipient of God's blessing, / nor an independent competitor to God's blessing, but / an interactive participant in God blessings. The Garden was a picture of the spiritual relationship between man and God and it included work.

The biblical view of course also includes the Fall. Sin has had an impact on Work. Work is not a curse, but outside of Eden, work is definitely harder. Now the ground yields its produce only with painful toil. / *To Adam he said, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil*

*you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food* (Genesis 3:17-19).

Notice, it is not work that is cursed; it is the ground. If you could take away the curse of the ground, work would be fine. Some of you remember Wilma Shelburne, B's mother. She was an avid gardener, which is amazing considering most of her gardening experience was in West Texas where the ground is definitely cursed. When the Training Work moved to Houston, one of the first things she did was put in a garden in her new home. I visited her one day and she couldn't wait to take me out back and show off her garden. She told me, "Its amazing. All I have to do here is drop things into the ground and they start growing. Back home it was so hard. Here its so much easier and more fun!" Compared to West Texas, back yards in Houston were lush and green and fertile. Of course they are also saturated with toxins from 50 nearby chemical plants.

Another problem outside of Eden, / workers and co-workers are sinners. Our motivations for work are often sinful. The temptation to be idle or lazy, to be greedy or selfish corrupts our work. When we left the garden, we came to forget the ennobling purpose of Work. When we lost that intimate relationship with our Creator, the meaning of work was profoundly affected. For the poor work often becomes a burden even oppressive. Throughout history empires have been built not so much by the hand of princes but on the back of peasants. Often in history the wealthy

become the “idle rich” and labor loses its dignity; it becomes associated with the less dignified. The ancient Greeks considered working with one’s hands as less noble, less dignified. In fact the Judeo-Christian philosophy has made Western civilization practically the only culture that values hard labor and given dignity and respect to the worker; ancient Greek, Indian, Asian and Chinese cultures have generally seen work as demeaning, to be done only by unimportant people. When I visited Brazil with some other Americans in 1973, we stayed with well to do Brazilian families. I remember how shocked the teenage Brazilians were when the teens from America talked about all having part time jobs, and earning our own money. That kind of work, to them, was only for the poor and unimportant. America, values hard work, maybe too much. In America, work has almost become an idol. The biblical vision of stewarding God’s blessings has been replaced with a secular view that sees profit as the ultimate virtue.

/ Eden’s ideal vision of work is neither onerous or idolatrous, and the Bible’s message is not only about the redemption of man; it is also about the redemption of work. Ecclesiastes sees labor as a gift from God. / *This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. / Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God* (Ecc 5:18-20).

Deuteronomy 24: 19-22 reveals two redeeming insights about work; it gives dignity and it is not all about profit. / *When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. / When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. / Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.*

In helping the poor, Israel was commanded not to take away the dignity of work but to create opportunity to work. As our friends at Habitat for Humanity so often say, “not a hand out but a hand up.” Also, the Law of Moses made it very clear that there are some things more important than simply maximizing our profits. / A society that forgets its poor and forgets how easily anyone could become poor, is a poor society. (Carpenter’s Kitchen)

In Exodus we learn that our labor can even be anointed by the Holy Spirit. *Then the LORD said to Moses, / “See, I have chosen Bezalel of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills— / to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts... / Also I have given ability to all the skilled workers to make everything I have commanded you:*

*the tent of meeting, the ark of the covenant law with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent... / and also the woven garments, both the sacred garments for Aaron the priest and the garments for his sons”* (Ex 31:1-11). When I read this passage I am reminded of our musicals which put on display not only our musically gifted members at Quaker, but also our carpenters who built the stage, our painters who designed backdrops, our seamstresses who created banners, our interior decorators who transformed the gym into an elegant reception area and on and on, each of these gifted by God and glorifying God as they used those gifts.

This redemption of work continues in the New Testament. / When the relationship between man and God is restored in Christ, the relationship between man’s work and God is restored as well. The whole process of being saved is a process of restoring the Eden relationship of man and God. That Edenic relationship between man and God includes man’s work. When our relationship with God is restored, in our work we become, once again, partners with God. Whatever work Christians may do, it is God’s work in this world, for God indwells the Christian as he works.

/ For Christians, all work is ministry. It is unfortunate when we use the word ministry exclusively for preachers or missionaries. It is a mistake to say someone “leaves the ministry” when he quits preaching. Christians may change their ministry, but they had better not ever leave the ministry!!! All Christians, all the time, are ministers. All Christians are priests of God. There are not two classes of Christians, ministers and non-ministers. Years ago / the Second Baptist church here in Lubbock had a wonderful sign out in

front of their building. On it was / “Minister - every single member.”

The Church is the Body of Christ and every member is called to be a part of Christ’s work. The early church was filled with people who worked in the marketplace, but who saw themselves first of all, and most of all, as servants in the Kingdom. / Priscilla and Aquilla ministered as tentmakers. / Sergius Paulus ministered in politics as a governor. / Dionysius, Apollos and Crispus ministered as professors in their local educational institutions. / Cornelius ministered as a military officer. / Erastus ministered in city administration. / Luke ministered as a physician. / Zenas ministered as a lawyer (yes, there were lawyers in the early Church!). / Barnabas ministered as a real estate agent, buying and selling (and giving away) property. / Lydia ministered as a very successful business lady in her city.

The point is obvious isn’t it? / When Christ transforms our lives, he transforms our work. Christ creates a better workplace. The relationship between slaves and masters is by no means equivalent to employees and employers. Unlike masters and slaves, employers don’t own their employees and they are not more valuable or more important; they both have the same basic human rights. So one must be careful making modern day application of instructions given to masters and their slaves. But, in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, there is a principle that applies to the work environment. / *Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. / Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving... / Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven (3:22-4:1).*

/ The employee is a better employee because he is accountable to Christ. The employer is a better employer because he is accountable to

Christ. Christians should foster an atmosphere of trust in the workplace. Even if your boss is a pagan your work should not be affected because you are really working for the Lord. Christ gives purpose and meaning to our jobs. No longer are we motivated merely by self-interest but as God's stewards we are motivated by God's interests. No longer are we only about profit and productivity, now we are also about partnership with God. Every job is a way of working with God to serve and to love people and we should see our work in that way. / If we cannot see our work that way, either we need to change the way we look at our job, or we need to change our job.

When you thanked God for your food this morning, you were also thanking hundreds of thousands of people who worked with God to get that food to you: the / farmer who grew it; the / banker who loaned the farmer money to put in his crop; the / trucker who brought the produce to the store; the / company that built the truck; the /gas station that fueled it; the / engineers who designed and built the highway; the / truck stop cooks, waitresses who fed and served the trucker; the /store manager and sales persons who sold the food; the / builder who built the store and the person, who shopped and brought it home to cook and serve to you.

Does that sound corny? Not to the Christian. We see this world as a place God has given for us to love him and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Our work is one way we do that. Paul says, / *We are created in Christ Jesus for good works*. What does that mean? Paul goes on to write in that same letter about three areas of our lives. I assume the good works we are created for are to be done in those three areas. In the next three chapters

he addresses personal behavior, family behavior and workplace behavior.

Paul sees the goal of the gospel as far more than changing individual people. He sees it as changing the whole world, changing society. All Christians are called to help God restore the world, person by person, into the original vision he had for Eden. And the Garden of Eden included work. Work is one way man reflects the image of his creator. When man works he is like God. Maybe that's a good way for all of us to see our jobs, as a reflection of the very kind of work God does.

/Are you an artist, so is God. / Are you into engineering and design, so is God. / Are you a producer or grower, so is God. / Do you do repair and maintenance, so does God. / Do you teach and counsel people? God does that too. / Do you deliver and transport goods, so does God. / Do you resolve conflicts and mediate between people? God is all about that. / Are you an entertainer, God certainly does that. No matter what work you do, labor is a gift of God, a way to be like God, a way to partner with God to love and serve others. / When Christ transforms us, there is no way that transformation does not carry over into our jobs. / When Christ gave us his great commission to go into all the world, we should not only think geographically, we should also think occupationally, to go into the worlds of business, education, medicine, politics, entertainment, science.

So this Labor Day let us ask God to make our work more of a blessing to us, to others and to Him. We are going to sing a song titled "To the Work, To the Work." It was originally written about doing evangelism, but

I hope we can understand it today as applying to whatever work we do in life. *To the work! To the work! We are servants of God; let us follow the path that our Master has trod; with the balm of His counsel our strength to renew, let us do with our might what our hands find to do. Let the hungry be fed, to the fountain of life let the weary be led. In the cross and its banner our glory shall be, while we herald the tidings, "Salvation is free!" Toiling on, toiling on, let us hope and trust; let us watch and pray and labor till the Master comes.*