

Sermon for Sunday, August 29, 2010

Finding the Center in Our Work

Col. 3:12-17, 23-24, Prov. 6:9-11, 26:13-15.

1. Work as we experience it - glory and misery, blessing and curse

We were made to work. God calls himself a worker: a creator, architect, builder, shepherd, king, judge, and counselor. All of these are good occupations. We find work satisfying because God works and he created us in his image. God is King and we rule under him. This holds for people who obviously rule – authorities. But it applies to everyone. A good teacher rules her class. A good graphic designer rules his pages. In a restaurant, both chefs and dishwashers govern their areas.

Yet work is like everything else in this sin-drenched world. The ground bears weeds and insect pests ruin crops. Our work wearies and frustrates us.

Researchers and scientists live with a paradox. We have to master the tedious art of sitting still and concentrating. Yet when we discover something exciting, the body feels the thrill too. We want to jump up and tell someone. But if we do, we lose the thought that was so exciting. So the glory and misery of work go together.

Those who work with their hands, with wood, brick, water, electricity, face another paradox. They want the work to be quick and easy. Yet, if it were, no one would need them. Challenges make work frustrating, but overcoming challenges makes work stimulating and necessary. Work is both glorious and miserable.

We get lazy, too. The sluggard says "There is a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets!" That is, my work could get me killed. I should play it safe. Sometimes we just want to go to bed early or stay in bed late: "As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed" (Prov. 26:13-14). They always have an excuse.

The Bible's big idea is that our work and our attitude toward it fit into our life as a whole, our beliefs, convictions, habits, virtues and vices. The sluggard isn't just lazy; he is a fool. Proverbs 6 says we should watch ants and hibernating animals and learn to work (6:6-8, 30).

We should know that laziness creates poverty (6:10-11, 24:30-31). It causes physical poverty and poverty of soul, chronic immaturity. And the opposite: it's the result of poverty of soul, a sort of blindness to the world.

Every year, thousands of college students fail because they're hooked on video games, old TV shows and whatnot. Can't they see? Solomon wrote Proverbs so we could see this world God's way. Rest too much, and poverty will come down on you like an armed man. The wise man passes the sluggard's field and sees weeds and broken walls. The sluggard looks at the same field and sees bad luck.

2. Work fits within a philosophy of life

Paul tells Christians, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men" (3:23). Earlier in Colossians, he tells servants and slaves to "obey your earthly masters in everything." Furthermore, he says, "Do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord" (3:24).

These are hard commands. How can Paul tell everyone, even servants and slaves, "Whatever we do, work at it with all your heart?" What if the work is dirty, hot, frustrating? What if the work seems like a waste and no one is looking? What if the orders seem foolish? What if the master doesn't deserve respect?

I understand the objections. "Work with all your heart" is unworkable as a mere command. But it can function within a philosophy of life, in the context of faith. If we believe God is behind the master,

appointing him; if we believe we serve God and humanity as we serve the master, then we can work hard.

But if we someone can choose their work and they choose work that seems meaningless or evil, it's nearly impossible to "work with all our heart for the Lord." The life of Augustine of Hippo illustrates.

Augustine was born into a prominent family, 354 A.D. in the Roman Empire. God gave Augustine a great mind; he applied it to rhetoric and philosophy. Rhetoric was then a foundational discipline for professionals. It required mastery of history, science, philosophy and law. It served public speech and debate.

The elite sent their brightest sons to study rhetoric to prepare for careers in law or government. Augustine was talented enough to teach rhetoric at age 19. At 25, he started a school of rhetoric in Rome. At 30, he became professor of rhetoric at the Imperial Court in Milan. There was no greater academic position in the Empire. Fame, glory, power and wealth, beckoned to him.

Yet, soon after he obtained this post, Augustine gave it up. For while he taught, he was also investigating Christianity. He had a basket of questions that no one answered to his satisfaction until he met the great theologian Ambrose in Milan. Ambrose answered Augustine's objections, but more. As Ambrose spoke, God spoke through him and "pierced" Augustine "with the arrow of love."

When Augustine came to faith, his attitude toward his work changed. He had been eager to make a name for himself, to get rich. He was anxious about his performance, because he feared the loss of his position, wealth and power. But now, says Augustine: "What I once feared to lose was now a delight to dismiss.... Already my mind was free of the biting cares of place seeking, of desire for gain, of wallowing in self-indulgence, of scratching the itch of lust."

He no longer wanted to teach rhetoric because he knew it promoted vanity, not knowledge. He wanted a better calling: "I did not wish my pupils, who were giving their minds not to your law, nor to your peace, but to frenzied lies and law-court squabbles, to buy from my mouth weapons for their madness." He could not sell his skills.

But how should he resign? He decided before God "not to break off teaching with an abrupt renunciation, but quietly to retire from my post as a salesman of words in the markets of rhetoric." It was roughly a month until a long vacation. He decided to work till then so he could formally resign and avoid the gossip that accompanies a sudden resignation from a high profile position. This was part of his break with pride.

Augustine found it hard to work the last few weeks, because he had taken an overload, to make more money. He talked so much that he developed lesions in his throat. After twenty minutes, his voice was cracking. He was miserable: "I no longer had the interest in money which ordinarily enabled me to endure a heavy work-load."

The lesson: We can do anything, sacrificing and suffering pain, if we are motivated. As long as he lived for money and glory, Augustine could teach until he ruined his voice. His skill led the elite to pay him handsomely. He was finding wealth and glory by teaching rhetoric. But when he stopped living for wealth and glory, he couldn't do it any more.

Augustine's story speaks to everyone who has options. If you can, choose work that matters to you. When he started living for God and stopped living for wealth and glory, Augustine realized that he was training leaders not to seek the law but to lie, not to seek peace, but to squabble. They bought from his mouth "weapons for their madness." He had to quit because his purpose in life had changed.

But I would be a poor pastor, a traitor to the gospel, if I simply commanded you to stop living for wealth or fame. Commands cannot transform. We cannot remove idols, we can only replace them.

Andrew Carnegie became fabulously wealthy when his steel company became the most profitable business in the world – before he was 35. At 33, Carnegie evaluated himself and wrote this memorandum:

Many must have an idol – the amassing of wealth is one of the worst of the species of idolatry. No idol [is] more debasing.... I must choose [a life] which will be the most elevating in character. To continue much longer overwhelmed by business care and with my thoughts wholly upon the way to make more money in the shortest time, must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery.

So Carnegie resolved to resign from business at 35. But he couldn't do it and he did become degraded, above all in the systematic physical and financial abuse of his workers. Why couldn't he stop? Because his work was more important to him than his character. The quick thought is that money became an idol to him. Not so fast: in itself money is merely an instrument. We worship money because it facilitates the acquisition of other, deeper idols.¹

- It promises comfort, pleasure, security, power, control or respect.
- It offers friendships, social success and acceptance. Perhaps by giving gifts, hosting parties, building libraries

Both the rich and the poor can work to serve their gods. A man may have little, but steady work can be his security and comfort. People can secure their gods on a modest income. So we cannot remove idols, we can only replace them.

3. The disciple's work begins with Christ

Colossians 3 places work where it belongs, in the context of life in Christ. Paul tells Christians, "You have been raised with Christ.... Therefore set your minds on things above.... For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." Therefore we put to death, "whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (3:1-4). We can and should put these sins to death because they are the fruit of idolatry.

When we live for money, work for money, we put up with worthless tasks. People make and sell whatever makes a profit, whether it's good for people or not. When greed drives work, we wound others and crush our own spirit.

When Augustine served fame and pleasure, he taught people how to use words to win arguments, rather than finding the truth. He taught them to quarrel and he hardly saw it, until he became a disciple.

Paul sketches discipleship as a whole before he moves to particular callings: marriage, parenting, and work. This is absolutely correct. Any advice about work must follow the issues of life-direction and character. Once our life course is set properly, once we try to make Jesus' character our character, it's easy to see how to work.

We can paraphrase 3:12-15: Therefore, as the elect of God, as a people consecrated to His service and specially endowed with his love, array yourselves in hearts of compassion, in kindness and humility, in gentle and yielding spirits. Bear with one another and freely forgive each other. As your Master forgave you, so you ought to forgive each other. These are traits that make us good workers.

Paul describes the Christian three ways: God's chosen, God's consecrated people, God's beloved. Because God has united us to Christ is love, we put on a series of virtues that show that we have put on or clothed ourselves in the character of Christ.

We have felt his love, so we feel compassion deep within. Toward others, we are kind. Toward ourselves, we are humble. A modest estimate of our importance leads us not to insist on our rights.

¹ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, pp.65-71

When something goes wrong, we endure difficult situations and put up with difficult people. If the problem goes from annoyance to sin, we forgive. If there is a complaint, a fault, an unpaid debt, we forgive because God forgave us.

On top of all this, we robe ourselves in love; for this is the garment that binds all the graces that make life good. These are the traits of Christ. The same traits will make anyone an ideal co-worker.

The NIV translation of 3:15: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." Literally, "Let the peace of Christ *preside, judge, serve as referee*, in all your difficulties. If you can argue for war or peace, if it's hard to decide between them, then "let the peace of Christ be the umpire." Let peace make the call, not a ball or strike, but to strike or to seek peace. The reason is clear: Christ called us to pursue the unity that belongs to his people.

Paul states three more guiding principles. You will see how they apply to our work: First, live in thanks, not complaint, envy, or resentment. Second, keep songs of Christ on our lips. Use the Psalms, from the Old Testament. And sing new hymns to Christ, written by the church.

Third, whatever we do, whether in word or deed, we do it in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Paul repeats everything: Do everything thankfully. Stay compassionate, kind, humble. Forbear, forgive, extend peace, and offer songs of thanks, to Christ, in his name. Notice: Paul twice mentions thanksgiving, songs, love and compassion. But above all, he twice says we do it all in the name of Christ:

Whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus (vs. 17).

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, working for the Lord, not men (vs. 24).

See the repeated concepts. Paul is talking about everything we do. And he says that in everything, we work hard and heartily in the name of the Lord, for the Lord. A little earlier, he applies that in a specific way for slaves and servants: "Obey your earthly masters in everything...not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord" (3:22).

What a blessed word this is for those who cannot seem to escape unsatisfying work. Field slaves and household servants often had miserable work. It was back-breaking, foul-smelling work in fields and barns. Often they had menial, repetitive and dull work in the home often without enough to do. Do it for the Lord, says Paul.

Whatever you might find tedious or unpleasant, do it for the Lord: Haul garbage, dig holes, clean bathrooms, deliver packages, change diapers, wash dishes, make phone calls, for the Lord. There is just one caveat: don't do anything you know to be immoral. If ordered to sin, for our work, we refuse, for the Lord.

4. Practical biblical principles give life at work

First, therefore, God commands us to work: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work" (Exod. 20:9-10). God commands that we work not just to keep us alive, but for our spiritual good. We work so we don't starve, but work also matures the spirit. We work to survive, but also to grow. We work whether we are employed or not. The work of a student is to learn and mature. The work of a retiree is to volunteer wisely and well.

Work is burdensome, soul-wearying, when we have to do work that an animal or a machine could do. But when we serve our neighbor and we know it, when we create, when we change the world, when we do God's work, it gives our life meaning.

Francis Collins, a believer and the leader of the Human Genome project, was a physician before he was a geneticist. Collins went to Nigeria in 1989, to a mission hospital to relieve the doctors so they could go to a conference, learn and recharge. He suspected that his skills, adapted to the finest hospitals, might be a poor match for conditions in Nigeria, and he was right. He had many frustrations with lack of equipment, but

worse yet was his knowledge that so many diseases and deaths were preventable: tuberculosis, malaria, tetanus, parasites – all preventable, yet he was powerless to change any of it. He wondered why he had come.

Then he met a farmer, dying of tuberculosis. So much fluid had collected in the sac around his heart (pericardium), that it stopped beating whenever he drew breath. There was one way to save him – through a procedure ordinarily performed by a team led by specialist, with everything guided by ultrasound. Collins had none of this. If the procedure went wrong, the patient would die quickly, if not, he would probably die slowly. He told the farmer everything. "Proceed" he said.

It worked. He was relieved, and then euphoric, he had saved a life! Then he was dejected, for the conditions that caused TB were unchanged. He saw the farmer, who had sized him up quickly. He saw that the doctor was new and said, "I get the sense you are wondering why you came here.... You came here for one reason. You came here for me."²

Collins had hoped to do something grand, but the farmer helped him see how rare that is. It's rare for our work to be spectacular, but it can be good. Indeed, that's the second principle.

Second, our work should allow us to do good to others. In every vocation, this is the foundational command "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:39). That outlaws some work. Drug dealers, pornographers, thieves, and contract killers do not love their neighbors. These are all illegal, but some work is legal and still immoral. Some activities are legal, but immoral. We should not produce or sell harmful things: Provide abortions, promote gambling or degrading entertainments. We should not produce "food" that can't nourish, health products that are mere placebos.

Jesus taught us to pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." That means our work should advance God's kingdom. It should move this world closer to God's ways. Does your work do that? Is it consistent with the Lord's prayer? Does it answer legitimate prayers for food, and shelter? If so, well done. The Lord is pleased.

Third, your work should meet your basic needs. The Bible defines these as "food and covering" (1 Tim. 6:8). We say food, clothing, and shelter. If possible, our work should provide those things. Paul even says "Anyone who does not provide for his family is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim 5:8).

Paul was discussing people who refuse to work. But what if we can't find work? The construction industry contracted about 50% in 2008-9. Still, we must work as we can, striving to provide for ourselves. The whole family can work together to provide. In all, adults should never choose to depend on others for basic needs - whether family, friends, or government.

The Bible never says *how much* we should earn. It never says it's wrong to be rich, but it does warn those who live in order to get rich. It warns "People who want to get rich fall into temptation... and into many... harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Tim 6:9-10).

Rather, we should strive to discover what our gifts are, and use them, whether they are lucrative or not. If God has called you to teach fourth grade then "work at it with all your heart, working for the Lord, not for men."

Sidebar: if you aren't sure what your gifts are, here is a suggestion: Try a variety of things and see if anything gains both positive feedback – and perhaps another similar assignment – and a sense of satisfaction. People are always looking for talent. If you have a skill, someone will spot it. And while no job is without its frustrations, it's common to find that we enjoy the work that uses our gifts.

² Collins, *The Language of God*, pp. 217

But I don't want to give too much advice. I want to take you to the center, to something that lets you work hard for the Lord whether it feels great, whether anyone is praising you or not. The ability to say, "Lord I do this for you. This work brings your kingdom in some small way. It shows your love to one person, maybe more. It answers good honest prayers. Whether anyone sees or smiles or rewards, I am offering it to you and that is my reward, for you are my reward, now and forever." It is the Lord Jesus Christ whom you serve.