

Sermon for Sunday, September 5, 2010

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Working for a Living

Psalm 127

On this day before Labor Day, how should we view our work? Some see it as misery and toil (and maybe all jobs feel that way sometimes). Some see as working for a living, “gotta” do it in order to play. The Bible calls us to see our work as a gift of God, an endeavor that he works together with us, alongside us to accomplish his good work. How do you view your work as honoring God?

Psalm 127:1 A song of ascents. Of Solomon. Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. ² In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat-- for he grants sleep to those he loves. ³ Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him. ⁴ Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. ⁵ Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.

I read a story about Architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who told of an incident that shaped the way he viewed the rest of his life. The winter he was nine, he went walking across a snow-covered field with his reserved, no-nonsense uncle. As the two of them reached the far end of the field, his uncle stopped him. He called on young Wright to look at the tracks in the snow, his tracks direct, purposeful, even restricted to the path, and the young boy's wandering, whimsical following of the path.

"Notice how your tracks wander aimlessly from the fence to the cattle to the woods and back again," his uncle remarked. "Look at my tracks. They aim directly to my goal. There is an important lesson in that." Indeed there are several important lessons: good purpose and determination in life, focus on goals, etc. But there are also others.

Years later the world-famous architect liked to tell how this experience shaped his philosophy in life. "I determined right then," he'd say, "not to miss most things in life, as my uncle had." As Christians we recognize there is joy in wandering and exploring God's magnificent world that we may miss with a “head-down” determination toward our goals.

Frequently we look at life like Wright's uncle, and perhaps we think God does too. Business, business, no time to enjoy what is around us! Certainly this attitude has shaped the way we view work life, always efficient, working longer and harder, or at least smarter. These are good goals for our work lives; however, the constant drive to produce can leave us empty, feeling the push to arrive earlier and stay later just to get that one more thing done.

The Bible wants us to recognize that God is a worker too. Work is a good thing. It is a blessing. There is joy in the journey of working according to how God has created and equipped us to labor for his good in this world. But how does God call us to live our work lives? What does it look like to view our work as God does? Let us look more closely today at our Psalm beginning in verse 1.

1. Because God works, we can work.

Verse 1 says *unless* the Lord builds, the labor is in *vain*. The *corollary* is also true: if the Lord is building, then our labor is not vanity; it is fruitful.

God is at work in this world. He began by creating it, designing it, fashioning it according to his purposes. He gave rise to the universe and filled it with good things. He gave the capacity to birds for flight, for trees to grow tall and beautiful, and pulled the parts together for the eye to see. God works to fashion his creation.

He also works to sustain this creation. He did not make it, no matter how long you may think it took him to do it, then step back to leave it to its own ends. God is intimately involved in ruling over this world. Certainly the incarnation of Jesus, fully God and fully man, demonstrate that God has not waned the world and left it alone without interference. In addition, the Bible is filled with verses that teach us that God has been involved in the outworking and sustaining of history and continues even now.

Psalm 104:14 He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate-- bringing forth food from the earth: ¹⁵ wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart.

Proverbs 16:9 In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.

Proverbs 21:1 The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.

One of the chief ways God works in this world is *through* us. God is at work redeeming, renewing, overseeing, and because of this we give ourselves to labor. We give ourselves to work for the things God works for: righteousness, justice, quality in what we produce, service of our fellow human beings. Why? Because we are assured that we are not alone in this world, and that God is doing his work of renewal in and through us!

Both of my children love stories. Emma Kathryn and Isaiah have loved to play a certain game with daddy where they help me make up a story. Emma Kathryn's stories are about princesses or the Lion King and Isaiah's are about trains. Always trains.

I begin by creating the beginning paragraph and introduce the story. Then I stop, and then the child tells a little bit extending the story line. Then I tell more, and back and forth we go weaving a story that we have made. It is some of the most fun I have ever had in my life, because with my words and initiative guiding and directing what we produce together we create this wonderfully satisfying and uplifting story. I work and my child works. Because I work, they respond.

This illustration isn't perfect to communicate how we and God work together, but please hear the point. Our work is beautiful and glorious because God is in it, molding, shaping, preparing, and blessing what we do. He is using us, working through us to rule and bless the world.

In a very real way, our work is collaborative with God, or perhaps more strongly, God directly at work in this world by using us as his instruments. We have the privilege of being God's assistants in running this world...for his purposes. Work isn't toil, it is seeing God at work through us to change this world.

The work God blesses is not simply "spiritual" enterprises. "Build", in Solomon's mind may recall the construction of his house, or the temple, perhaps other facilities. Watchman, soldiering, protecting the city, all the work they did in Solomon's day and the work we do today, has value when we spend our lives working toward restoration and renewal of goodness in this world.

Martin Luther once wrote, "The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays -- not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps, but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship."

All of our callings matter to God because he works through us and our callings in his ruling over this world. The truth is that God calls us to kingdom business, not simply church business. The work of the kingdom is broader; extending the principles and blessing of God's ways into all of society is the business into which God calls us. We can do this God-honoring work whether selling cars, constructing something, cleaning, leading a business, or tending to our children. He calls us to produce things of quality that serve and bless others, to design them, to manufacture them, even to market them. He calls us to apply kingdom principles in whatever we do, whether law, banking or baking.

You honor God and see his work through your life when you examine your life and ask a few key questions:

- What do I love to do? Is it right and honoring to God? Not only what I feel pleasure doing, but...
- What am I good at doing? Do others see my work and recognize its value?
- What do I find joy in doing, even when the work is difficult?

What are those things in your life? Find what it is and give yourself to it, recognizing that as a Christian man or woman you are not alone. Because God works, you work...with confidence in what your hands produce.

2. Because God works, we can rest.

This, however, is only where the Psalm begins, and certainly we must continue to learn the lessons God has for us. The Psalm shapes the way we go about our work. It helps us navigate the right path between work and overwork, between diligence and workaholism.

But in verse 2, what God warns against is what is called here "toil" or "anxious labor" which is vanity, he says. Many houses can be built and cities guarded, with all attention, and strenuous labor, but all this is for vanity if God's work does not uphold the endeavor.

This is a key point of the Psalm. We may get up early and go to bed late with the design of working diligently enough at our tasks to *ensure* nothing bad happens or *guarantee* success of our efforts. And yet we can't do it. Working nervously, being driven by fear, is not the way to labor for the Lord. This anxious toil can tend toward idolatry of our work, seeking to guarantee success by our own might.

God wants us to recognize that no matter how hard we labor to achieve great things, the success of that thing ultimately rests in God's hands! Our highest and best efforts come to nothing, are vanity, without God's help, so success rests with God. Because God works, we can rest on him, without the pressure of the demands of success. We work hard, but God determines the results of our labor.

Here Solomon turns to give us two pictures, two reasons why we can rest, confident in assurance that God is at work. The first is found in verse 2.

Psalm 127:2 In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat-- for he grants sleep to those he loves.

Sleep

Some of you may have a different translation of verse 2. It may read as is printed in your bulletin or... “In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he provides for his beloved while they sleep.”

Either read he will give sleep to his beloved, meaning rest from labor. Or, he will give to them while sleeping, meaning God will continue to work his purposes in us long after we go to sleep. The Hebrew can be read either way. Which reading fits the context better? I think the later reading does. He provides for us while we sleep.

God isn't encouraging laziness, snoozing through life; rather, we can labor in diligence with a quietness of heart and conscience, recognizing that God brings results. Even while we are sleeping, God is not. He is working for his purposes through us, even while we are asleep. So we may rest, knowing God is on the job at all times. There is no need to work ourselves into frenzy with anxious toil as if everything rests upon our shoulders. Why? Because God still works while we rest!

We must not keep at work out of fear, asking “Have I done enough?” At the end of the day when you have given all you can and worked on a problem with all the faithfulness you can muster, and you face the decision, “Do I go home and care for my family, or give it just one more hour?” Go home, because God is at work even when you are not. Can we trust God with the things most precious in our lives? Can we trust him with the labor of our hands? Can we trust him to work for kingdom principles even while we need to rest? Without a doubt!

Before being called to the pastorate, I worked at Covenant Seminary. Part of my duties there were to help raise scholarship funds for the school. I participated in a capital campaign that added the Library and new faculty as well. Early in the planning of the campaign, Bryan Chapell, the president, was sent to speak to one of the chief supporters of the seminary to discuss the campaign. The plans were ambitious, but we were sure God was in them.

This gentleman encouraged Bryan with a phrase that has appeared again and again through church history and always gives great hope in the midst of challenge. When the case was laid out in all its challenge, the man remarked, “Responsibilities belong to us, but results belong to God.” We perform our callings to the best of our abilities and leave the results of our best labors to God. He will bring fruit from them. We can rest and go to sleep at night, because God is STILL at work.

Children

The second picture Solomon gives us to encourage our rest comes from a bit of an unlikely place; he speaks of children as a blessing.

Look at verse 3, “Sons are a heritage from the Lord...” What does this have to do with work? Nothing seems like a more mechanical and natural progression than from human comes human. Input and output, we know how and why we have children. But God challenges our view: children are not simply a matter of the result of labor, so to speak, they are the blessing of God; they are a heritage from him. One thing we think we really understand and know how to produce as the fruit of our labor actually comes from the Lord. Something that seems so mechanical is not in our hands; God is at work in it. We can trust him.

What are we to make of the arrow and quivers? Children as a weapon in Solomon's day, is not to communicate merely a violent image. Rather when a man aged, his sons would be available to offer protection and assistance, especially as the family aged beyond the years of caring for themselves. Sons given as the blessing of God help us to recognize the protection and foresight of God to provide for these

aged families those who will offer assistance protection when they could no longer provide for ourselves! The point is that God anticipates and provides for our needs...and we derive reward and pleasure from his provision. We can rest, because God is at work providing for our needs years before we even understand or appreciate what our needs may be! With a God like that, one who anticipates and provides, we can rest!

Has God ever anticipated your needs and blessed you with the solution even before you knew you had a need? Have you ever felt like all was lost, and in the depths the Lord opened your eyes to a solution he provided and was there all along: a solution he provided before you ever knew you had a problem? He does it for us because he is faithful. He has done it again and again in our lives.

I hope you recognize that he has done it magnificently in his provision of Christ. Paul says, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us – the godly for the ungodly. Our God is in the business of providing salvation for rebellious and unfaithful children through the blood of his son. And he did it for us when we didn't really think we needed him. Grace came to us in Christ when we were opposed to him, hating him. Before we could appreciate our need, Christ was doing his work, to provide you and me with the work only he could do, satisfy our debt of sin before a holy God. We need God to work for us, in the large things and the small...and then we can truly rest.

3. Because God works, the fruit will endure.

What ultimately are the house and the city upon which God labors and we labor from verse 1? Certainly we understand this to mean not simply physical houses and cities, but also the house of God, the church, his people. He is building the city of God, as John calls it in Revelation. God is building his church, and the church stands not just stone upon stone, but life upon life. It is God who does this work, and it shall endure.

And this house, this city that God is building is established not upon our goodness or our works, but upon Christ, who is the chief cornerstone. Our lives are joined together into the great temple of God, established upon the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. It is in union with him, being joined to him, our lives mortared together with his in this building of God, that we find rest and peace. Jesus' life is ours; the cross is ours; his resurrection and future are ours. God is at work within us, and his fruit in and through us will endure.

Brothers and sisters, find rest today, because God is at work, working in you, working through you, and working for you to build a future and a hope more glorious than we could ever dream of. Call on him and lay hold by faith today.

Who are you working for? Is it simply for self, or is there a higher purpose, higher allegiance in your life? Have you trusted your whole life, everything you are and have to Jesus who works for you even though we have worked against him?

He longs to restore you and renew you, working his purposes through you. He also longs to give you rest, rest from the treadmill of self-promotion. He says come to me, all who labor unto weariness, and I will give you rest.

Come to Jesus and find rest there.