

Take Your Job and Love It

Text: Genesis 2:7-17

Hymn: "Lord Jesus Christ, Life-Giving Bread" (LSB 625)

*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.
Genesis 2:15*

Work is a gift from God. Now, most of the time it doesn't feel like it. It doesn't seem like it. Work is something that we avoid at all costs. From our earliest years we are taught to long for the day we can stop working. I've heard many say how life is backwards: If only one could retire first, when the body is still able to enjoy it. How common it is to think of work as at best a necessary evil. But God's word is clear. At the time of our text in Genesis 2, sin has not entered the world yet. After forming him from the dust of the ground, God takes Adam, the crown jewel of His creation, and places him in the garden of Eden, "to work it and keep it." Work is a gift from God. That's God's design, God's plan.

Now, we know this isn't the end of the story. Adam is alone. God in His love gives him a suitable helper. He takes a chunk out of Adam. Out of one He makes two. God's gift to Adam in his wife. Look around, you married people: Your spouse is a gift from God. Marriage, the lifelong union of one man and one woman for mutual companionship and procreation, is a gift. Life, work, marriage. All of these are given by God before the Fall. So, the views of Greek philosophers and Ralph Kramden notwithstanding, there is nothing inherently bad or evil in work or marriage.

Genesis 3 follows Genesis 2 and the consequences of sin come crashing down on God's perfect creation. Marriage instead of being the joyful, peaceful union God

intended will now at times become a clash of wills. And, when it comes to work, God said to Adam:

Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'
cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return (Gen 3:17-19).

What did Adam do for his work in the Garden of Eden? Don't really know. He didn't pull weeds. There were none. He didn't sweat and toil because that was a consequence of sin. But he did work. He was not created for idleness but for purposeful activity. His work was a gift from God. And this gift was a joy to him.

Everything that is bad with regard to work is a result of sin. But that does not change the fact that work itself is a gift from God. And like any gift from God, it can be abused or misused. That happens all too much in our world. Ask somebody the question, Why do you work? Most of the time they will respond with, "Because I have to." Not because they *want* to but because they *have* to. They have to, why? Maybe to make Mom and Dad happy. But more often it's because they need money to pay the bills. "I want a place to live, a vehicle to drive, clothes on my back, food in my belly. Money doesn't grow on trees. So, I work."

How many times do we actually pause and give thanks for the fact that we have a job? I am often amazed how much time people spend avoiding work. People will

spend hours and hours plotting on how to get out of work than actually doing it. A friend of my parents, the accountant for the company my parents worked for when I was growing up, used to tell this story on himself. When it came time to take the CPA exam, he had come up with an ingenious plan to get out of studying. He collected the past twenty years' worth of exams and put on a spreadsheet all the different questions and in order of how often they appeared in previous tests. The idea was that he would study only the top 65% most frequently asked questions ones. But, of course, by the time he had done all that, he had easily spent twice as much time as his fellow future accountants who just studied like a normal person. All in the name of avoiding studying. We avoid work at all costs, because we are sinners by nature. But it was not so in the beginning. Before the Fall, we were created to be purposefully active.

I think our experience last year during the worst periods of the pandemic testify to this. In places where there were extended lockdowns, when people were forced to be home doing nothing, we're only now learning just how damaging this was—how many began to suffer or are even now suffering from clinical depression. Inactivity, idleness paralyzes people psychologically. It is a sign of mental ill health not to be capable of activity. This stands to reason—being active in a purposeful way is a part of human nature and part of the goodness of creation. As Solomon says in Ecclesiastes, "Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much" (Ecclesiastes 5:12).

But there is an opposite extreme to avoiding work or being sinfully lazy and that is the extreme of making a work a god, where work becomes the most important thing in life and everything else comes in second—spouse, family, church, everything—all because work has now become my god.

Hard work is good. And work is a gift from God. But work is not God. “But, Pastor, let’s be honest. You say God needs to come first, but we all know work has to come first. If I don’t work, I can’t support my family. If I don’t work, I can’t pay my taxes. And if I don’t work, Pastor, I can’t put money in the offering plate.”

How we try to justify our actions and our sin, even betraying God and perverting His Word in the process! If our work gets in the way of being a good husband or a good parent or a good member of the congregation, we need to have a talk with our boss. And if that doesn’t do the trick, we need to change jobs. When you have an opportunity to move because of your work or because of a promotion, the first question you should ask, Is there a good solid Lutheran congregation for my family to attend and receive the gifts of God? And if not, and you’re not willing to start one in your house, don’t move.

A Lutheran pastor by the name of Gordon Dahl said it back in 1972—alas, it still rings true—“The problem with most Christians in America today,” he said, “is that they worship their work, they work at their play, and they play at their worship.” That was a favorite line of one of the founders of the Higher Things youth organization. Several of our youth just got back from a Higher Things retreat in Indiana. And one of the reasons it was founded over twenty years ago was to help young Christians get those three things straight—when at church, you worship; when on a break or on vacation, you let your hair down and play; when at the office or in the classroom, you work, you study.

Work is a gift of God. But too many times we have abused or misused this gift. We’ve been lazy. We’ve been slothful. We’ve been selfish and we have been idolatrous. God calls all of us to repent. He calls all of us to examine how we use the gifts He’s given us, including the opportunities, big and small, to work.

What's the answer? The answer is Jesus. Jesus was given a job, a vocation, work. The Father sent the Son to work out our salvation. Thank God Jesus didn't decide to sleep in or play hooky. Jesus, in full and complete obedience to the will of the Father, fulfilled all of the Father's words, every one. He completed His task, His work. He left nothing unfinished, nothing undone. He went all the way to the Cross, bled and died and three days later rose again, never to die again. But His work to save us did not end there: His forgiveness, life, and salvation, He poured out on us. For our apathy and indifference toward work, for our workaholicism, these and all our sins He washed away in our Baptism and declared, "My son, my daughter, your sins are forgiven."

In the Feeding of the Four Thousand we're given a beautiful illustration of what this ultimately means—Jesus has come to restore the world and us in it to that perfect position God originally intended, where there is still work but without the futility and the stress and the burdensomeness. Because of our sin, our cutting ourselves off from the gifts of God, God punished man in such a way that instead of depending on God's resources we would have to rely on our own. But four thousand hungry followers of Jesus got to experience a foretaste of Paradise to come. And because Jesus came and did His work, answering for all our sin, we can look forward to the Day when the ground's curse will be lifted, when the thorns and thistles of this old earth will be replaced by the tree of life, scarcity put away, and all creation will again rest in God's limitless provision. Until then, may God keep us in the faith and instill in us hearts of thankfulness for the gift of work. Amen.

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