

Work

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, 2:22-26

June 27, 2021

Main Point: All of us have work – loads of it! God gives work as a creation ordinance. It is a good gift, a part of living out the image of God within us. In Genesis 2:15, He tells Adam to ‘work and keep’ the Garden of Eden. So there is dignity, worth, and value in all our work, whether we are building, guarding, cultivating or protecting. We spend the vast majority of our lives working. 6 days out of 7 we are to work. How do we work? With what motive, what purpose, what goal? Two ways are presented here – under the sun and above the sun.

Intro: Why preach on work?

For most of us, if not all of us, COVID -19 seriously disrupted our work. Major adjustments.

A friend whose company provides resources and services to hospitals. And all of a sudden hospitals had to cancel elective surgeries which dramatically affected their bottom line. Huge new emphasis on controlling expenses, cutting expenses, and expanding services.

In the midst – their way of communicating within the company drastically changed as it did for so many of us – no more travel and complete reliance upon videoconferencing. And then, watch out for misinformation related to Covid and health protocols. Hospitals were depending upon his company to minimize risk, for example, from buying fake N95 masks which were essential for doing health care.

And I know you could tell story after story of how the pandemic affected and is still affecting your work – whether you are a student, a stay at home mom, a teacher, a company CFO, or a pastor.

So it made me think about work and how the Bible gives us fuel for our work in this fallen world.

SI: Ecclesiastes, while talking about the big topic of the meaning of life, is not all that complicated or hard to understand. After a long life of indulging in everything life has to offer, the Preacher-Philosopher looks back. I’ve had everything and it has proved to be empty. Riches and material possessions, wisdom and knowledge, power, sex, honor and applause – he has experienced all of these to the full and they are like nothing...

But over and over (7 times), The Preacher goes back to the value of work (2:24, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:18-20, 8:15, 9:7-10, 11:6)

Read and pray.

Why does he speak in all this negativity about the vanity of pleasure, riches, knowledge, and work, but then say the opposite – that work is valuable, honorable, life giving, enjoyable?

Why is that?

B/c work is intrinsic to human-ness.

B/c work is part of being created in the image of God.

B/c work was part of the original creation before The Fall. We all have a part to play in God's mission of bringing light, order, and beauty to this world.

See Gen 2:15

How do we find satisfaction in our work? Why are we doing what we are doing? How do we connect Sunday with Monday? How does faith affect work? There is much to say, but for one sermon, let's look at it in these two broad categories to give us what Ecclesiastes shows us – there are two ways to look at our work. Under the sun and above the sun.

1Work “Under the Sun” is ultimately empty

1:1-11

Vanity repeated 31 times

“under the sun” over 30 times

Why work under the sun is futile, empty, and ultimately meaningless is b/c we are trying to give to work what it cannot give back. Trying to give to work the ability to define us, to give us identity, purpose, satisfaction, and rest.

We get a lot of pressure on ourselves for work to define us. Note the question – “What do you do for a living?” Which our hearts can quickly translate to – Why are you here? Why do you exist? What value do you bring to the world?

And so, Ecclesiastes says > if you go all the way down that road, if your work is the main voice that answers the question of ‘who are you?’, then the answer is futility, meaninglessness, vanity, vapor. Because you are trying to give work a power that it cannot bear up under – If you try to give work the ability to define you – to give you identity, purpose, satisfaction, and rest – it will fail.

The result is shame – you can't do this, you are empty, you are not enough, you are a failure, you are worthless. Shame is the flip side of pride – pride in work says look at what I have done, what I have accomplished, what I have made of myself and my career, my life, my identity, my value, my worth. This is why the author gives so much text to the negative... this is our natural bent, our observation of the way the world is and the way the world works and it can be a lot, be overwhelming. V. 8 – wearying -

The warning of 2:26 > stark warning that all you worked for will mean nothing and will even be used against you b/c you tried to build your life and your legacy on what you could accomplish.

For what does it mean (v. 26) to please God? It means to receive from Him. To humble yourself and die to your prideful mistrust and going your own way. The “sinner” is the rebel, the refuser, the one who cannot enjoy because he can’t receive gifts.

The power of discontent to turn you, to drive you to Christ. The emptiness serves God’s higher purpose for you – to flee to Christ – wow these promises that life under the sun gives are false – this is the great attraction of Ecclesiastes – I can pursue all this stuff to the greatest degree possible and it’s all nothingness.

ILLUS of “There is No End to Love” by U2 – In your bedroom, in your mirror, watching yourself cry like a baby. There’s no end to grief, that’s how I know there is no end to love.

Trans to 2 > So that if you live ‘above the sun’ it flips everything. What was drudgery becomes enjoyment. What was ordinary becomes worship. What was boring becomes life giving. What was empty becomes fulfilling b/c your labor is not in vain.

2Work “Above the Sun” makes all the difference

There is a pattern in Ecclesiastes of lots of negative passages detailing the pursuits of all the things this world has to offer and how they all have turned out to be empty. Then those long negative passages are set against shorter positive passages that reference the alternative to living ‘under the sun’ – that is, in Leland Ryken’s words – the alternative is to live ‘above the sun.’ God is in the heavens, you are on the earth (5:2). If you are in Christ, Your life is hidden with Christ. To see your work in light of God’s mission.

So verses 24-26. He gets there. All this pursuit of the good life but turning up vapor leads to this brief passage that flatly contradicts what the previous sections have asserted. And its not escapism! Its not withdrawal into a spiritual life of meditation, it’s going into earthiness by rising above. So that you bring the heavenly mindset down into the earthy realities of eating, drinking, studying, working.

See your work with different eyes.

What spoils and poisons work, pleasure, and knowledge when it is lived under the sun? The effort to get more out of them than they can give. Work is gift, but it cannot give you what your soul longs for – peace, rest, contentment – in a word, satisfaction.

Eccles is clarifying b/c it offers a vision of enjoyment and rest in God. “All my life long, I had panted for a drink for some cool spring, that would quench the burning of the thirst I felt within. Hallelujah, He has found me, the one my soul so long has craved. Jesus satisfies all my longings, in His love I know am saved.” The difference in our work is whether we are working ‘under the sun’ or ‘above the sun.’ (From Leland Ryken)

Another way to say this > If you seek your being from your doing, you will live like the author here perpetually seeking, always frustrated and angry. If your doing flows out of your being, then you will find rest. Your identity comes first. This is the great transforming power of Christian identity which produces the Christian work ethic. I work out of who I am, not I derive who I am from my work.

So, The key to working above the sun is the word ‘enjoyment.’ V. 24 – to enjoy means “to look upon the good” Receiving, taking in, sitting and soaking, basking in, delighting in.

The upside down nature of the kingdom... see how this applies to work? The Bible’s view goes deep down to your soul to enable you to work not for identity, but from identity. My identity is above the sun, in the heavens, so whatever my hands and my mind find to do here, I do it with enjoyment.

So if you want to find more satisfaction in your work, look to your identity in Christ first. Personality, experience, desires, drives, passions, interests, abilities – those are all very important to help determine calling and vocation – but they are not the most important. And when you get the first thing first, the other things fall much easier into place.

Practical how to’s: how to enjoy your work in this way.

1Ask God for help - Tap into God’s mission for this His world – How am I responsible for how the world is or for how the world isn’t? So that everything from picking up a piece of trash to bringing order and discipline to a large company are part of God’s work to restore, heal, and bring human flourishing to bear even while living in the midst of a world that has pandemics, tornadoes, and messy diapers.

“Wood and Nails” by The Porter’s Gate ... “show me how, to work and praise, knowing that, I am Your instrument.”

Consider liturgies – practices, habits, prayerfulness: “O God, grant that my heart might be ordered aright, knowing that all good service faithfully rendered is first a service rendered unto you. Receive then this my service, that even in the midst of labors that hold no happiness in themselves, I might have increasing joy. Amen.” *Every Moment Holy*

2Receive what comes to you and see it as God pouring out His kindness to you.

Speak especially to those who are having a difficult time enjoying their work: God gave this to me. What is here that I can take in, receive as gift and celebrate? Even if I'm unemployed. Even if I don't get paid anything for this job.

Be patient with the seeming dead ends in so much of our work:

Karate Kid - ILLUS of purpose in toil > (verse 26) The Karate Kid – Mr. Miagi's training program was car waxing and fence painting. All day long, day after day, repetitive, boring tasks. Daniel became so frustrated that he decided to quit – to the point of exasperation. Then, Mr. Miagi let him in on the secret. There was great purpose in his toil. Why do I have to do this seemingly meaningless work? Why do I have to wait so long? Every work, every labor is preparing you for something else. When you press through, when you don't give up, when you don't rebel, when you choose to stay on the hard and narrow road, it is preparing you for the hard and narrow road of life that leads to eternal bliss.

As Steven Garber says, "Vocation is integral, not incidental, to the mission of God." Connect Sunday to Monday – this will give you enjoyment in your work, and in God, to enjoy Him!

Example of this as a result of the pandemic:

New value in working from home to displace old models that worked against integrating life and work.

Hardly anyone had heard of videoconferencing at my friend's company. They planned a meeting and it was always in person. And in person meant dressed up in suits and in the office. Commute time and being present from 8:00 – 5:00 was just assumed.

Well now... work from home, time with his kids, jump on a videoconference and get business done a whole lot quicker while wearing uh, not suit and tie anymore!

So my friend is able to enjoy what his work is giving him – way more flexibility and way more benefit to his family, and more efficiency for his company!

Ways to ascertain your mission while serving God's mission.

Conc:

Malachi 4:2 But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. Jesus calls Himself the Light of the World. Jesus is the Sun of Righteousness. He who dwells above the Sun and created the Sun is brighter than the Sun and will give life to the weary who live and work under the sun.

B/c what has been done for me, what I do for a living is not the most important thing about me.

Jesus was fully human – he was a worker who worked with his hands and his mind – a carpenter.

*Read 5:18-20 – God has given you your days. God has given you your wealth, possessions, and power. God has given you joy in your heart.

Communion: The whole of work here displayed. All of the heart of work right here. Whether your work is completely behind the scenes and only seen by God, or your work is up front for all the world to see – here we are given the motivation to work as unto the Lord