

“Why Work?”
Genesis 1:26-31
April 24, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

We are beginning a new sermon series today that I’m calling “Thank God It’s Monday: A Theology of Work.” In this series I’ll be seeking to counter the current trend to limit the Christian faith to an hour or two on Sundays or, even more problematic, exclusively to a person’s private life. There’s a gap between Sunday and Monday that needs to be closed. Worship is not just something that happens on Sunday morning, but something that is to pervade all of life, both work and leisure.

We begin today by looking at the beginning of work as described in the first chapter of the Bible. As we consider this, I want to ask the question that is asked in the title of this sermon. Why work? This is a very important question, revealing your personal theology of work. Your answer to this question will also affect the quality of your work. Many answer this question like this. “I work because that’s the only way I know to get a paycheck.” There is a movement today that goes by the acronym FIRE, which stands for “Financial Independence, Retire Early.” Proponents of this are aggressive savers, saving 50-70% of their income, in order to retire in their 30’s or 40’s. Their answer to our question is that work is simply a means to the ultimate goal of non-work. Another answer is provided by the bumper sticker you might see that says, “I owe, I owe, It’s Off to Work I Go.” The answer given to our question by this bumper sticker is that work is simply to fund the consumer lifestyle, a lifestyle requiring significant debt. The reduction of work to a paycheck almost always leads to a negative view of work. Such negativity is reflected in quips you sometimes hear. “Work fascinates me—I can sit and watch it for hours.” “Hard work may not kill me, but why take a chance?”

Others answer the question with a more positive answer, but also one that falls short of the biblical answer. This group looks to their work as part of their identity. It gives them some prestige and a sense of personal worth. For this group, work has become an idol that gives them meaning in life.

We want to consider today how the Bible would have us answer this question of why we should work. Work is such a prominent part of life that the basic answer to this question is given in the very first chapter of the Bible. I note two reasons in our text.

I. I Work Because I Am Created in God’s Image.

We can see something of the prominence of work in the Bible right from the start. Genesis 1 begins with the work of God in creation. It is important to note that God's work in creation is described in ways similar to human work, though God is not bound by such things. For example, as our Confession teaches, "It pleased God ... in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days; and all very good" (IV.1). Why six days, when God could have created everything in a millisecond by the word of his power? And why after a week of work does it tell us that God rested on the seventh day, when God never needs to rest?

God describes his work of creation in such terms because these are the features of our work. As God's image-bearers, we work in the same way God works in Genesis 1-2. Let's look more carefully at God's work here and explore its implications for our work. First, God's work is done in steps. He had a goal in mind, the creation of the heavens and earth, and he accomplished that work in a series of steps. That's the process of our work too. The high school English teacher wants to teach her students to write well. Doing so requires time and some not-so-fun tasks for the teacher. She assigns essays to be written, and then must grade those essays. The unwanted task of reading mediocre essays for several hours is a necessary step toward a higher and a worthy goal. One of the challenges we all face in our work is the need to remember how the necessary steps serve the higher aim. It is easy to forget this higher goal, with the result that work can become mere drudgery.

What is the higher goal for your work? Perhaps a couple of examples might help. I was listening to a TED talk recently that featured author Stephen Johnson. He was talking about the human developments responsible for the most numbers of lives saved by that development. Some were expected, such as medical developments. But there was one among the top group of developments that was unexpected. It was indoor plumbing, which is a fairly recent development. It has saved millions of lives merely by allowing for the separation of clean water from dirty water. Plumbers are often called upon to do dirty jobs. If asked what he does, though, a plumber should not say, "I do the dirty jobs no one else wants to do." Rather, he can rightly say, "I'm saving lives by keeping clean water separate from dirty water."

If I can speak personally, this reminder to remember the big picture helps me in my work. The big picture for my work is that I help people to know what God is like. But if you were to follow me around all day, you would see me do things that don't seem to have much to do with that glorious purpose. You would see me do such things as plan meeting agendas, answer emails, have meetings about seemingly mundane matters. I had one meeting this week, albeit a short one, about how moving tables was damaging the floor in a room at the kindergarten. I spend much time many days just helping the machinery of the church run smoothly. But it would be a mistake for me to think of my

job merely in those terms. Rather, when I remember that my ultimate goal is to help people to know God, and that a necessary part of that job is to attend to the institutional and organizational needs of the church, I can work more as God works in this passage. So this leads to an application for you all. How should you understand the big picture of what you do all day? It may help you to process that with others.

As we begin to grasp that big picture, we become more like God as he is portrayed in Genesis 1. There is a clear sense of exuberance God has in his work. At multiple times in this chapter, he does what all workers do and steps back to evaluate his work, declaring it to be good. Later biblical authors reflecting on the Genesis creation account refer to creation as God's "handiwork" (Psalm 19:1), as if God is a craftsman. This is the God in whose image we are created. The implication of this is clear. It is in our nature to work. Labor is what theologians call a "creation ordinance," meaning that labor is an essential part of life in this created world. Though, as we're going to see in a future sermon, labor has been negatively impacted by the fall of humanity into sin, it was present before the fall when everything was good.

The first answer to our question of why we should work, then, is that God is a worker, and we are created in his image to be workers. Work is fundamental to who we are as human beings. I realize this statement needs some qualifications, and we are going to be talking about that at a later time. For example, there are some who by reason of infirmity are unable to work. And all of us as we age experience a diminished capacity for work. But much of this is a result of the fall, and we need to remember that work, not leisure, is fundamental to who we are. Like work, leisure is a gift of God, but its context assumes the fundamental nature of work, from which playful leisure is a necessary break. We play in order to work, rather than working in order to play. If we reverse that by making work subservient to leisure, we violate our nature as God's image bearers.

The 2008 movie WALL-E is about a robot whose job is to clean up an earth that has been trashed. Humans have evacuated the planet in order to allow their servants, an army of robots, to clean up the planet, after which the humans plan to return. WALL-E meets another robot by the name of Eve, and the two of them make an unplanned journey, via spaceship, to a high-tech space station where the humans now live a carefree, work-free existence. They are waited on hand and foot by an army of robots. These pampered humans have become self-indulgent couch potatoes. They now resemble giant babies with soft faces, rounded torsos, and stubby, weak limbs. All they do all day is to sit on their soft reclining chairs staring at video screens while they take in a large number of calories while sipping from straws sticking out of giant cups. Perhaps the movie challenges us with the question, "Is this what you really want?" God knows what we really want, and that is to follow his lead into exuberant work in which we can lose ourselves.

II. I Work Because I Am a Steward Over God's Creation.

The first command God gives to his image-bearers contains a second answer to our question of why we should work. **“And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth’** (1:28). This is commonly referred to as the cultural mandate. We work because God has given us an assignment and authority to complete this assignment. The authority we are given is described by the word “dominion.” The word sometimes used for this is “vice-regent,” which basically means an assistant king. God has given to humanity some of his authority to rule this planet. We are stewards and managers over this world.

I note a couple of things from this cultural mandate that touch upon our work. First, in being told to subdue the earth, the assumption is that it needs subduing. God didn't create a finished product where we just move in and turn on our televisions. God created the trees and stones needed to make a house, but has left the making of it to his image-bearers. This idea corrects two mistakes that are commonly made. One mistake is to think that wildness is the preferred condition of the world. The assumption is that the more we let nature take its course, the better things will be. The biblical view is that we are to work to tame the wildness in some way, improving things by our work. But as we do so, we need to be careful not to fall prey to the other error, which is to think that we can do anything we like to this world, that it is ours to use and even abuse for our own satisfaction. To do so is to forget that this is God's world over which we have been made stewards, not owners. So the word “subdue” indicates that we are both to conserve nature and to improve it.

This is a big job, and it brings me to the second point I want to make from this verse. God tells mankind in the cultural mandate to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” for the simple reason that the subduing of the earth he has commanded is a big job requiring many hands. Each of us has a part to play in this big job, and the part we are to play can rightly be regarded as a calling from God. This truth has rather significant implications that we will be pursuing in future sermons. For now, though, let me mention one of those. We are all finite creatures with limited time and limited abilities. If that was true before the fall, it is even more the case after the fall with the added limitations it imposed. The place we occupy in this bigger picture will always feel small in comparison to the bigness of the greater command.

An application of this truth is to know your limitations and be okay with those. Our day seems to be plagued by an anxiety that feels that we should all be doing more, and that there is something wrong with us if we're not. We even

visit this upon our children, signing them up for all kinds of extra activities while also requiring that they study hard and make good grades. It is widely viewed as appropriate for parents and adult leaders of children to tell them that they're great at everything. I would suggest to you that we are doing our children an immense disservice by telling them that they are great at everything. That's known as a lie, because neither our children nor any other person on the planet is great at everything. One of two bad things will happen as a result of this lie. If your children believe it, they will wonder why no one else recognizes their greatness, with some pretty negative results. Or they will eventually realize it is a lie as they encounter those who are more gifted in certain areas than they are. Perhaps then they will wonder why their parents and teachers perpetrated this falsehood. It is a wonderful gift from God to realize that we are not omniscient. But we have each been given certain gifts from God, and it is good when parents help their children understand what these gifts are. And it is good when parents help their children understand that the purpose of these gifts is to answer God's call to serve in bringing about the kingdom of God.

No matter what your job may be, we each have a part to play in bringing about kingdom culture in our corner of the world. Someone who heard I was starting this sermon series today sent me a story from 2016 about a janitor at Crestline Elementary School who was a finalist for Janitor of the Year. It became clear in the article that Jerome Lewis regarded his job as bigger than mopping floors, removing trash and cleaning bathrooms. He did those tasks, but also remembered why he was doing them. He was being faithful to God's call to the bigger purpose of loving the children who walked those floors and used those bathrooms. He was bringing about the cultural values of the kingdom of God in the small corner of the world God had called him to labor in.

CONCLUSION:

The most complete man who ever lived didn't do everything. There is an account in Mark's gospel of Jesus spending one day healing people. The next day, he rises early to pray, and his disciples rebuke him for not being available to continue his healing work (Mark 1:37). Jesus said, **"Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out"** (1:38). Jesus knew what his work was, and he said no to other things in order to say yes to that work. Most importantly, he said "Yes" to the work of providing our forgiveness through his sacrificial death. He did so that the vision of work given in Genesis 1 might be realized as sin is dealt with and all those who trust in Jesus' work will live on the new earth with our Lord.