

GOD WORKS AND WE WORK
(Genesis 1-3)

Turn please to Genesis 1. This is the first of what I plan to be several sermons on work and family.

Today's message is a basic theology of work from Genesis 1-3. When I say work, I mean what most of us do most of the time. We have here teachers and builders and a computer technicians and lots of other things.

And I certainly include the work of homemaker. It takes lots of work to manage a household that has several people living in it, and not only sheer effort, but also administrative ability and initiative and relational skills.

I do not mean jobs; I mean work. Work often turns into a job, but much work happens that is not a job. We're talking about work.

I am doing this series about work and family for two reasons. One is that a believer (like everyone else) spends a lot of every ordinary week at work and in family relationships, and Scripture speaks about both of these.

As children of God the great father, and as followers of Jesus, we need to know what the Scripture says. Our goal is that our whole lives look like God wants them to look. Work and family are a huge part of our lives. So we should learn what God has said.

The second reason for this series is that our society believes and does some things about work and family that are not at all what God had in mind. So, we need to know what God has said.

That is the gap I want to try to fill. This 1st sermon is called, God Works and We Work.

GOD HIMSELF WORKS, GOD IS A WORKER

Let's read Gen 1:31 - 2:2:

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. ¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. ² By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.

Creation does not sound to us like it was hard work for God. He just speaks short sentences. How can he need a rest? I don't know that, but the Sabbath teaching we just read understands God's work as the kind of work in which rest after is a good idea.

The biblical view is that God works, and that his work is a lot like human work. Here is one good illustration of this from the Bible. The 4th commandment God gave Israel said to keep the Sabbath day holy. I will read beginning in Exodus 20:8.

I will read you that command, and I want you to look for the explanation for resting on the 7th day that is in the 4th commandment. The explanation assumes that what God's work in creation, and people's work in an ordinary week, is the same.

Listen to how the 4th commandment explains *why* Israel should keep the Sabbath holy.

⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labour and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.
[Exod 20:8-11]

What people do for 6 days is the same as what God did during creation. Both are work. God is a worker.

PEOPLE WERE CREATED TO BE WORKERS

Let's read Genesis 1:27-28.

*²⁷ So God created human beings in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

God created people in his own image. Given that one of the few things we know about God so far in Genesis is that he is a worker, it seems to me that to be a worker is part of what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God.

God is a worker. God makes people in his own image and likeness. Therefore, the people are workers.

The blessing sounds like a command, but it also blessing. It's like, "let there be light." When God says something will happen, then it happens. What will happen?

Five things: be fruitful, increase in number, fill the earth, subdue it, rule everything. The first three have to do with family, and the last two with work. Here's family: be fruitful, increase in number, fill the earth. Here's work: subdue it, rule over everything.

We are designed to increase in number and fill the earth, and as we increase to take charge of earth, rule over it and manage it. We are designed for this, and called to it. It is a matter of both our natural design, and a matter of obedience.

Gen 2:5 says there were no plants, and no rain, and no man to work the ground. Gen 2:15: *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*

From the start, when everything was perfect, people were made to work. Perfect Creation, even the wonderful Garden of Eden itself, needed work done, it needed workers. People were designed to be workers and to do that work.

When God makes woman because it was not good for the man to be alone, that was not simply because the man was lonely.

In the context of that part of the story in Gen 2, it was because what God had made people to do could not be done by one person, so God made the man a partner.

Not that it could be done by two, either, but that the two would have children, and so on, and eventually there *would* be enough to take charge of the earth as managers under God.

So, we are designed to work the earth, and called to it. There is no command to work. The 4th commandment says to get all work done in six days, and so to rest on the 7th. The command is to stop working on the 7th day. People are by nature workers, and designed that way by God.

Long-term unemployment brings deep discouragement and despair, and mass-unemployment in modern society brings serious social problems. This is so because people are by nature workers, and designed that way by God.

When people do not work, they not only fall short of what God has called all people to do, but they also are being less than human. Laziness, or unemployment, which are often very different from each other, are both quite literally de-humanizing.

Not only can we not take care of our material needs without working, but without working we cannot take care of our spiritual needs either, or function properly as human beings. We are workers.

WHEN PEOPLE SINNED, WORK GOT WORSE

Gen 3:17-19 - *Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. ¹⁸It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food.*

The woman's relationships to children and husband become painful, and the man's work becomes painful.

This does not mean that women don't have painful work, and it doesn't mean that men don't have painful relationships with wives and children. We'll talk more about that another day; for now the topic is work.

Work has become hard and exhausting because the first people rebelled against God. There was always work, but it was not like this before people sinned and before God cursed the ground.

Creation now resists our effort to manage it, to work it and tend it. It didn't resist this before the fall, but now it does. As a result, work is harder, it is toil, it is drudgery. Now we must sweat just to stay alive. Before, that was not true.

This text introduces a second purpose to work. The first purpose existed already in the Garden: subdue the earth, rule over it. The first purpose of work was and is to bring order out of disorder. Perfect untouched creation was never God's ideal.

From the very start it needed organizing, managing, it needed help. I am using words that are a general and a bit vague because this must include the huge variety of what is good human work.

Work is to bring order of disorder. And the order we introduce is always deteriorating back into disorder, so much work is maintaining order. That's all the first purpose of work.

The second purpose of work is to provide for ourselves. That started with human sin. Before that people just worked, and the food was there. Now, *through painful toil you will eat from the ground all the days of your life.* ¹⁹*By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food.*

Now, we work in order to have food and covering. It is hard work. Being able to work is a gift from God. Deut 8:17-18 *You may say to yourself, "my power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.*

God does not give this ability out democratically. Not everyone, by any means, has the ability to provide for themselves. The most obvious examples are the young and the old. If someone who can work does not provide for them, they do not survive.

There are others who cannot provide for themselves, either because they lack the mental ability and stamina, or they lack the physical ability and stamina. God simply did not give them the ability to provide for themselves.

Eph 4:28 - *He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.*

That text covers both the purposes of work: *doing something useful with his hands.* That's bringing order out of disorder, or maintaining order, the first purpose.

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That he may have something to share with those in need. That's working to provide, and to provide for more than self.

Here's 2 Thess 3:7-10 ⁷ *For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you,* ⁸ *nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.* ⁹ *We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate.* ¹⁰ *For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "Anyone who is unwilling to work shall not eat."*

To have the ability to provide for ourselves, and not to do it, is a real problem in the kingdom. Paul lived a brutal life, full time tent maker and full time apostle, so that no one could look at Paul and say, "he doesn't work for his money; why should I?"

1 Tim 5:8 - *If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he had denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

1 Timothy 5 has instructions about what kind of people the church should take care of, and what kind they should leave alone. It is a pretty interesting chapter! In the verse I read, some believer is saying to themselves, "I don't have to take care of my family; the church will do that."

Paul's answer: *If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he had denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

FOUR REASONS TO WORK

One, we work to be useful, bring order out of disorder, contribute to the lives of people.

This was true a reason to work right from the Garden, and in this kind of working we imitate God himself. After people sinned, work is in some ways undoing the effects of sin, of the curse.

Two, we work to provide food and clothing and shelter for ourselves and others.

This seems not to have been true in the Garden, at least not in the same way, but since then it has been true. In this way also we are like God. God does things to help others, to help us. He also works to provide for others.

Three, we work because the job itself satisfies us. We enjoy our career.

This is not a very high priority in Scripture. *Through painful toil you will eat from the ground all the days of your life.* ¹⁹*By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food.*

Paul describing himself to the Thessalonians: *we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.* Job satisfaction was not high on Paul's list.

We want the activity of the work itself to be enjoyable. That is a good thing, but it is a fluke, a luxury. For much of the world, it is out of the questions. They work to stay alive, period.

Did God enjoy creating? I assume he did. After he had made things, he looked at what he had done, and he enjoyed that. But I have done tasks where I found the activity itself completely obnoxious and unpleasant, and yet afterward I was pleased with the results.

There is something satisfying about work, and the results of work done, even when the work itself is unpleasant. If the activity itself is enjoyable, that is a luxury.

Four, we work to have money to buy fun things and to do fun things.

I don't know what to say about this. Some days it seems profoundly sick, others days it is harmless. I know that this is a big factor in our society, very big. Among the human population as a whole, this is utterly impossible, a nasty joke.

I urge you to find meaning in the first two things I mentioned: that by working we are bringing order out of disorder, we are doing something useful with ourselves, useful for Creation as a whole; and two, we are providing for ourselves and others. Both of these are deeply godlike.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

If we could get rid of work (which I don't believe for a minute we can), we would be much the worse for it. Don't have in mind a utopia for us all, or even for yourself, where there would be no more work.

Instead, picture a place where there would be work, but it would never be drudgery, never exhausting, where work would be productive, enjoyable, and energizing.

Work is good. I put myself through school working at a plywood mill and a planer mill and a pulp mill. I never liked work, always disliked it, only some were not as bad as others.

To find work so unpleasant is not bad or worldly or immature. Genesis 3 assumes that since the fall this dislike will be a common experience. But work is still a fundamentally good thing. It is an expression of God's goodness to us, that there is work to do, no matter how unpleasantly we experience it.

God is a worker, and he made us like him. We also are workers. Work has been worse since people sinned, but we are still workers, in the image of the Working God.

And work is fighting against the fall, against the curse of sin. Sin has disarranged everything horribly, and work is rearranging, endlessly rearranging, the disarray that sin has caused. Work is holy, it is war on the curse, and it is imitating God.