

Sanctity of Work

Wow ... here we are at Labor Day ... quite a summer we've been through, right? Did you know that Labor Day became a federal holiday in 1894? It honors the American labor movement and the contributions that workers have made to the strength, prosperity, laws, and well-being of the country. Ironically, on Labor Day most workers do not labor. It is celebrated on the first Monday in September, which has evolved into the long weekend considered the unofficial end of summer and the last fling before school starts.

With people out of work or their work seriously disrupted, maybe the pandemic has revealed to us just how important work is. There is something to be said, especially from a Christian perspective about the place of work in our lives. The news reports on the employment/unemployment figures for the nation highlight just how important work is to people and the nation.

I guess it's just human nature that people complain about their work until they don't have it. I respect one of the men in our congregation who has so often offered a prayer of thanks for having work.

The Bible and Work

Why do we go to work? Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker: "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go." Is there more reason to work than to pay off debt? Many of us work, and maybe work more than we want to, because we care about our families. That's a good reason to go to work, and we generally despise the one who's family suffers because he/she doesn't work. St. Paul said to the Thessalonian church: *For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat,"* 2 Thessalonians 3:10.

Yet there are other compelling reasons for going to work. Even those who must work to make a living often yearn for meaning and purpose in their work. The Bible tells us that right from the beginning God gave humans work to do, pleasant work (Genesis 1:28). God gave humans dominion over the rest of creation, to bring it into order but not abuse or destroy it. Genesis also tells us that even before the man and the woman, God was at work Himself ... a very creative work, bringing all of creation into existence. *God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good,* Gen. 1:31. It also says, *By the seventh day God completed His work, which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done,* Gen. 2:2. The account goes on to tell how Adam and Eve were given to cultivate and protect the garden - Genesis 2:15. But when they disobeyed God, their work became drudgery and a curse, rather than the blessing it was originally - Genesis 3:17.

What is the wisdom we can draw from all of this?

- 1) Creativity is a divine attribute and humans made in God's image share this. God's call to humans involves a continuing of the creative and providential process in partnership with Him in their own work.
- 2) When people are in alignment with God's rule there is joy and meaning in work. But when out of alignment with God, work becomes just a necessary evil. My guess is that most Christians find themselves somewhere in the middle, wanting to apply a godly ingredient to their work, but finding it difficult to do so.
- 3) Rest from work is another divinely appointed part of life. Having a "sabbath" from our necessary work restores the mind, the body, and the soul. Ideally the weekly (as in God's example) refreshment attunes us to our Creator in whom we find strength and creativity.

Your Work and the Bible

The greatest part of many peoples' lives is spent in the workplace. In these hours, they are faced with the tasks of the job, but also wrestle with meaning and may find some sense of community in the process. Our Christian life cannot be left at the church doorstep or in the home. It must be with us at

work as well. There is a faith and work connection. Each Christian person has been called by God to contribute to the lofty goal of God's kingdom, and to the health of both the Church and the general community. Christian faith isn't *just* about spiritual things, or family well-being; it's about our everyday life as well, and that means our work. God is with us in the workplace as well as in the home. Dissatisfaction with work may well be due to a failure to allow God into the workplace.

Just about any occupation that has a touch of the original, incarnates the divine creativity that comes from God. Even homemakers, or factory and office workers, doing the routine, can find ways to grace their work with a creative touch: a testimony to the human and divine spirit at work. Providential work refers to all that God does to maintain the universe and human life in an orderly and beneficial fashion and provide daily sustenance for life. Our human work participates in God's providential work. Think of all who ensure we have good food – farmers, processors, truckers, grocers, stockers, checkers, etc. Think of police and fire protection, janitors, garbage haulers, clothiers, barbers and hairstylists ... and many more who help us maintain our lives.

To work in partnership with God also means to take on his concern for compassion. In reply to Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9), the Bible responds, "Yes, you are." Care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the disabled, the elderly, and the visitor is a theme repeated throughout the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms and the prophets. The followers of Jesus were reminded of the importance of the teachings of the Law concerning justice, mercy, and honesty (Matthew 23:23). Our work must include godly treatment of others in the workplace and concern for the less fortunate. Although human justice can only partially embody God's justice, compassion can also be sought in the work of lawyers, judges, legal workers, and law enforcement officers, even as all people seek to avoid unfairness and discrimination. Being a good Christian at work means being both competent and compassionate.

Whatever the job, it is an extension of the faith journey, a way to revere God, promote Christian values, and spread the gospel. One's job provides the opportunity to partner with God to shape the workplace. The postmodern world needs to know that God's work is not limited to certain professions in particular places. ... *Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven*, Matthew 5:16. Important, soul-touching conversations can arise in the repetitive work of the office, or in the draining work of physical labor. Service and blue-collar work has not always been honored by society, but Jesus himself was a carpenter, working humbly in a small town. He changed the world.

Your Work As Witness

Most of life is lived out in the secular workplace. The Bible makes clear that disciples of Jesus serve Him in all times and places. God's intention to redeem the world is worked out through His disciples, and Jesus prepares our hearts and souls to be His ministers in the world. Our ministry to takes shape in the workplace and elsewhere. Wherever we are, we have an opportunity to model and share the gospel truth that all of life is a partnership of service with Jesus. This does not mean preaching and Bible-thumping to your co-workers. No, it really starts with making real in your own life the heart and soul preparation that Jesus can do in you. He is wanting to form you into His disciple in all areas of your life – including work. I said earlier that God is with us in the workplace. Are you with God when you go to work? God does not leave you when you retire ... are you still with God in your retirement? Christians do not cease working for the Lord until Jesus returns or He calls us home, whichever comes first.

Career and success can bring a sense of satisfaction, but rarely give a sense of purpose and meaning. Finding purpose and meaning in Jesus' service, though, brings lasting contentment and fulfillment. I spoke earlier about being in partnership with God, through the creative and providential processes. This is a response to His call. His call is also a call to competency. Christian people, of all people should have the attitude that doing excellent work is a service to the Creator who has made all things excellent. Tradition has it that St. Augustine was once criticized for buying his sandals from a

non-Christian when there was a Christian sandal-maker in town. Augustine replied that he did too much walking to buy inferior sandals. Competency is not a means to wealth, or position (although these may follow), but a value in itself which serves God. Others depend on the competency of one's work, whether in a medical or helping profession, in the home, or in factory work, administration...

Most of life is lived out in the secular workplace where God still calls people to His purposes. Everything God does revolves around the work of salvation in Jesus Christ, reconciling all things to God - a work not limited to evangelists, apologists, and church planters. With God as your vocational director, you can be involved in His redemptive work. *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, Colossians 3:23. And while you're at it ... Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have, 1 Peter 3:15.*

Nehemiah 3:1-32 lists all the men and groups of men who labored for 51 days to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem after the Israelite refugees returned from Babylon. Why list all these people? Each one was important to the effort and without the effort of all the job could not be done. Our work is important for what we contribute to ourselves, our families, and to others whom we may never know. Those men worked without ever thinking their names would be known 2500 years later. But they are immortalized in the Bible.

So, this Labor Day let us thank God for all who work faithfully and diligently that we may live in peace and prosperity. And let us remember that God doesn't require us to be successful by the world's standard. But He does require that we be faithful. In that light here's some on-the-job guidance:

- Stick to the job a bit longer when quitting would be easier.
- Do the work with excellence even if nobody notices or praises or thanks you.
- Keep servicing even if you think you're doing more than your fair share.
- Refuse to allow any other attraction to shift you from loyalty to Jesus Christ.

What we do for the approval of others brings temporary recognition and reward. What we do for the Lord's eyes and His approval will never be forgotten! As it says: *For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saint, Hebrews 6:10.*