

Redeeming Work

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Let me read three passages from Scripture for you. We will come back to each in turn later in the sermon. But, as we start, just listen to what they say about work.

(Contextualize each of the passages.)

Genesis 1:26-31

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷ So God created mankind 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.”

Genesis 3:17-19

¹⁷ “Cursed is the ground because of you; / through painful toil you will eat food from it / all the days of your life. / ¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you, / and you will eat the plants of the field. / ¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow / you will eat your food / until you return to the ground, / since from it you were taken; / for dust you are / and to dust you will return.”

Revelation 21:22-27

²² I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³ The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵ On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶ The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. ²⁷ Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone

who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

I wonder if you can recall how you envisioned what working would be like when you were young. Maybe you imagined being a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher or a police officer. Perhaps you dreamed of doing meaningful things in your work—saving lives, changing unjust laws, instructing future leaders, or busting bad guys. Do you recall those youthful visions of a future career?

My first career path took me back to the high school from which I graduated. For a couple of years, I taught high school English. I spent the better part of 4-years of undergrad and 2-years of graduate school preparing for and dreaming of teaching. In the dreams, I saw myself as a combination of Sidney Poitier in *To Sir, with Love* and Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*. And of course, at the close of each year, my students would sing a song to honor me.

The time has come for closing books and long last looks must end / And as I leave I know that I am leaving my best friend / A friend who taught me right from wrong and weak from strong / That's a lot to learn, but what can I give you in return? / If you wanted the moon I would try to make a start / But I would rather you let me give my heart "To Sir, With Love"¹

Some here are teachers. How do you think that went for me in my first year of teaching? Just like my dreams, right? No, of course not. Those students weren't as excited about the subject matter as I was. In those movies, they never show hours of grading usually poorly written essays or sitting through laborious faculty meetings or preparing feverishly for state assessment exams.

Can you believe that Hollywood would sell us something short of the truth?!!

But, here's the point of all this. In our hearts, we know that work will be hard and frustrating and sometimes futile, and *yet* we nevertheless dream it'll be different for us. We have a sense that it has been different (somewhere, sometime in the past), and we believe that it can be different again (somewhere, sometime in the future). These echoes of Eden, concerning our work, are still audible to us—no matter if we are believers or non-believers. We all know, I believe, that we're created for work—

¹ You can read the full lyrics of "To Sir, with Love" [here](#).

meaningful, challenging, and satisfying work. Not the work we experience currently in this wonky, fallen world of ours.

Friends, God created you for his service. He created you for good works... as well as good work. And, he's even now recreating you to do it. Let's see how.

Sometimes we wrongly suppose that Eden was something like a luxury hotel, like Adam and Eve just soaked all day in pristine hot springs plucking gourmet fruit from trees. But that's simply not the case. That's not the perfection pictured in Eden. It wasn't a perfection of leisure, but a perfection of missional service they enjoyed while in the Garden—the perfection of working for and alongside of their Creator. Recall the thematic of work in Genesis 1.

- First, God (in his six days of creative work) made us to image him.
- So, we are to rule over creation with him—over the creatures of the sea, over the creatures of the air, and over the creatures of the land.
- Next, we're called to do the work of creating those who bear God's image. And, that isn't just having babies, but teaching those babies to know God and to walk with him. That's real and important work.
- Finally, we're told to subdue the earth. Our first Mother and first Father are supposed to expand the Garden. These verses teach us “to be stewards, rulers, and guardians of the garden, and then of the wider world beyond.”² That's quite a job description, isn't it.

So, friends, what's clear when we read Genesis 1 and 2 is that we were created for work. Before sin ever marred this world, before it distorted how we see all things, we were created and commissioned by God to work.

Moreover, we know for certain that that work was good and even very good. Listen to God's judgment of his creation and his commission—our work included. Just a few verses after our passage, the author tells us of God's assessment.

² Daniel M. Doriani, *Work Its Purpose, Dignity, and Transformation*, 27.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day (Genesis 1:31).

So, the first thing we must learn from our Labor Day weekend study of work is simply that we are created to find joy and purpose in our work. And, furthermore, that we are supposed to image God in the work we do. Now, as you know very well, none of this is easy. But, nonetheless, it is our calling as Christians.

And, it's what we're destined for! I want to skip over today's second passage and look for a second at the third one. We'll come back to Genesis 3 in a moment. But for now, look again with me at where God is taking our labor.

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book... (Revelation 21:22-27).

If we make the mistake (I mentioned earlier) of thinking of the Garden of Eden like a 5-star resort of some kind, then we (I believe) often make the same mistake when we think of eternity with our God; thus, we wrongly imagine the New Heavens and the New Earth as some perfect kind of blissful retirement—with golf courses and Brazilian barbeques and Imax matinées. But, that's nothing at all like the portrait the Bible paints for us.

Notice that both “the kings of the earth” and “the nations” will come marching into the eternal city, the New Jerusalem, and as they do, they'll “bring their splendor” and their “glory and honor” with them. What does that mean? What's being pictured in this passage?

My doctoral advisor would explain it this way. He'd have his class of students from all over the world gathered, and he would read them this passage from the book of Revelation. Then, he'd ask each of us to share what aspects of our various cultures we'd especially like to see marched into the heavenly city on the day being pictured in this text. In other words, what creative expression of your history and your culture

would you like to bring redeemed—glorified, honorable, splendid—before your God as an act of worship?

This will be our redeemed career. We will be on creative mission for eternity, working to bring ever new glories before the infinite Creator of all things.

Friends, what will you bring on that great day? Open wide your imaginations! Start to dream of the glorious work you'll be set apart to do for your God.

I really like what N. T. Wright has to say concerning this in his book *Surprised By Hope*. Speaking of our new reality, he writes this.

...the living God will dwell with and among his people, filling the city with life and love and pouring out grace and healing in the river of life that flows from the city out to the nations. There is a sign here of the future project that awaits the redeemed in God's eventual new world. So far from sitting on clouds and playing harps, as people often imagine, the redeemed people of God in the new world will be the agents of his love going out in new ways, to accomplish new creative tasks, to celebrate and extend the glory of his love.³

Dear friends, this is where you're headed if you have turned from your sins and turned to Jesus. No boring, leisurely future. No whimsical, lazy lounging-about on clouds with harp and with halo. Simply creative and worshipful and meaningful and joyful work unto the Lord! Amen? Amen!

Well, let's turn finally to Genesis 3 because this is where the proverbial rubber (when it comes to the question of work) meets the road.

All of us have to ask: How do we treat work now in a fallen and sinful world? How do we view work in light of the curse? Let's read what the text says once more. Here's what the Lord says to us there.

“Cursed is the ground because of you; / through painful toil you will eat food from it / all the days of your life. / It will produce thorns and thistles for you, / and you will eat the plants of the field. / By the sweat of your brow / you will eat your food / until you return to the ground, / since from it you were taken; / for dust you are / and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:17-19).

³ N. T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, 105-106.

- You know the curse. You spend all day in a garden plotting and planting, but, within a week, you can hardly tell what you've planted from the weeds around it.
- You know it too well. You lovingly prepare a meal for your whole family, but when they sit down to eat there are groans of disappointment from kids, and no one really seems thankful for it.
- You know it professionally. You do your job with diligence and excellence and honesty, but that guy who always kisses-up gets promoted instead.

Some here have jobs they don't really like—jobs they don't feel fulfilled in. Welcome to work in a fallen world. In every aspect of our work, there will be things we do that seem meaningless, pointless, ridiculous. In every job, there will be things which we never quite feel good at. In every endeavor, there will be areas of failure. This is work in a fallen world. These are some of the lingering effects of the curse upon our work. And, they so often demoralize us.

But, friends, if you follow Jesus, then you know these things are passing away. You know this curse on work has been reversed and, even now, is on its deathbed. And, this changes everything about how we do whatever it is we're doing presently, since we know it matters to God. That's why Martin Luther King Jr. could say:

*If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say: "Here lived a great street sweeper."*⁴

Have you lost this vision for work? If so, refocus your attention. Set your eyes on Christ. Follow him in whatever work you're called to do.

Because, friends, Jesus is our ultimate model for work in a fallen world!

The only Son of God put on flesh and was born into a poor, oppressed family. He was a carpenter's son and learned the trade. Did you ever stop to consider that?

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., "MLK Quote of the Week," *The King Center*, April 9, 2013.

What Jesus' life looked like before he began his ministry? He worked with his hands. He probably made tables or things like that.

You know, I'll bet you Jesus made the finest tables. The best tables for people! And, when he did, I can promise you he brought glory to his Heavenly Father.

Yet, even more to the point is the work he was ultimately sent to do for us all. A job that was below him! Work where he was underappreciated and misunderstood! Work where he was falsely accused and persecuted and murdered!

This is the work of our Savior. This is the work of our salvation. Amen.