

WORK: THE CURSE AND THE GIFT

Genesis 2:15, 3:17-19

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Bethany Church

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It is one of the greatest gifts, but also a malicious thief. It validates our significance, offers accomplishment and provides sustenance. Yet, often it steals time, saps energy, assaults dignity and claims one's health. It is a 4-letter word, and it dominates lives. It is *work*. Some live to work. Some work to live. Some live at work, and many die at work.

Labor Day celebrates the productivity and dignity of work. It also calls us to remember its abuses. We've tasted its amazing achievements in medicine, engineering and other fields. Yet, we've witnessed its cruelty in sweatshops, bankruptcies and dangerous pursuits.

Wednesday, I received a call from San Antonio. My brother was flying home to California from his 11th business trip in 12 weeks. He had confided earlier that his health had been affected by the 60-70-hour-work weeks that was expected, and that he and an associate had filed a class-action lawsuit on behalf of the 500 workers in his situation. His strategy was to request overtime back-pay for all the hours. He and the \$75 million lawsuit are now featured on MSNBC, a major news website. As I read his story, I found that over 3900 such lawsuits were filed against companies in federal court last year, more than double the civil litigation that was filed in the previous year. What's behind this? With all the job losses and cutbacks in the past couple years, many workers face increasing demands. Like the Israelite slaves who Pharaoh required to produce the same number of bricks but now gather their own straw, they feel a

crushing burden. The blessing of work has become a curse. It empties them of life rather than fulfills it. The crucial issue for my brother and for us all is “what is God’s plan regarding work?” and “how shall we respond?”

Before Satan tempted Adam and Eve, before they sinned against God, before there was any brokenness between humanity and God, there was work.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Genesis 2:15, NIV)

Work was as normal and healthy as life itself. It was our joy. Work was less a way to provide a living and more an expression of who we are. Work was a function of our design. We were made in the image of a worker.

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (Genesis 2:2-3, NIV)

God, who is a creative worker, made us in his likeness. God works and also rests from his work. A cycle of work and rest are woven into the fabric of creation. We live in 7-day cycles. Although the task may not be finished, the Bible reveals that our work is to be completed and followed by rest, not only each night, but also each week. The word Sabbath means rest. God rested, plans for your rest, and even plans for the land to rest.

God glories in his work and celebrates in his rest. God’s Spirit inspired David to write:

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. (1 Chronicles 16:24, NIV)

Hebrew poetry rhymed in thought, not word. “The nations” and “all peoples” were thought-rhymes that wedded the concept of “glory” and “marvelous deeds” together. God’s deeds were his glory.

David rhymes *glory* and *work* in another poem:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
(Psalm 19:1, NIV)

Indeed, the Apostle Paul writes Roman believers that we human beings are the glory of God. However, because of sin, we have fallen short of that glory (Romans 3:23).

God glories in his work, but he also celebrates in his rest. When God completed his work, he surveyed it and saw that it was good. An evaluation was made. A judgment was declared. The fruit of his work was “very good.” When the seventh day began, God did not work. Instead, he blessed the day and set it apart. That’s a celebration. We were made in the image of a working, evaluating, resting and celebrating God.

As much as we need to breathe, we need to work. Idleness kills us. We need to produce. We need to do something of value. We need to see the worth of what we do. Someone told me that at one time, the average IBM retiree drew only 18 paychecks. I’m not sure of the exact figure; but once their work was done, their lives were too. For many, many people that is still the case. When they retire, they get depressed. People, who focus on the toys of retirement, either binge at a frightful pace to abate depression or they slowly surrender to a creeping sense of futility. By nature every one of us need to produce. That’s our glory. It must become rhythmic.

Unfortunately, there is also a curse. The very thing that brings provision and fulfillment hurts us. Isn’t it striking that the greatest achievement of God, the creation of his likeness, the human race, brought him sorrow and death? His most diligent work became a curse of pain and loss. Similarly, our sins cause us to share in God’s experience. Like God our work comes back and bites us. Listen to the curse:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of 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, NIV)

Our work is not cursed. *What we work* is cursed, the *ground*. Also *what we work with* is cursed, our *bodies*. We still get to work like God, but that work brings “painful toil.” Thorns and thistles may cause some damage; but more than that, they cause pain. We experience pain in work. We have to endure to succeed. We have to persevere to provide. We have to expend to eat. We sweat a lot. What we take of the ground is costly, and it will reclaim us. The ground claims us. It reclaims our bodies. The curses of the ground and of death affect our work and our world.

Agents of those curses are *plagues, pestilence, and people*. Sometimes, plagues come from diseases, disasters and deceit. The recent economic downturn involved all of those problems. The other agents, pestilence and people, are creatures that Satan manipulates to frustrate and hurt us. Consequently, both employees and employers can be instruments of the curse. Instead of blessing, they can bring great harm and make the work painful. We can serve as thistles and thorns, obstacles and tormenters; or we can become servants of redemption.

Jesus Christ died to remove the curse, both from the ground and from our bodies. *When we act in his Spirit, we don't perpetuate the curse. We signal and speed its end.* We are to partner with Jesus in removing the curse. We are privileged to work with our heavenly Father and his Son in the vocation of redeeming his children and world from the curse. We can do this in one of two ways. One way is to embrace our vocation as our **primary task** in God's mission. In this view, our work as a clerk, manager, farmer, custodian, teacher, engineer, care-giver, technician, assembly-line-worker or salesperson is a holy pursuit. We engage in these jobs as a holy calling. Our goal is not merely to fulfill some human standard. It is to pursue a sacred mission that accomplishes a piece of God's vision for the world. Each day when we get up and prepare to work, we equip ourselves for a mission; and we depend upon God to honor our efforts

and supply our needs. Each day our employment brings us fulfillment, even though we must confront agents of the curse and contend with their harm. For me as a pastor, that is quite easy. I dislike aspects of my work, and occasionally am wounded and even get sick from it. However, when I get up in the morning and walk across the parking lot, I'm on a holy mission. I have no question about what I am doing. I'm fulfilling the purpose for which I was born. Not all that I is healthy or helpful, but *my vocation is my call*.

A second view identifies *one's vocation as support for one's call*. Tony Campolo tells the story of a PhD who quit his job teaching at a university and became a letter carrier. He tried to encourage him to be a tremendous postal worker; but the man told him, "I'm a rotten letter carrier. It takes me all day to get through my route." It took him all day because he visited and cared for the people on his route. He was God's priest and servant to many of those who were hurting and lonely on that route. He had no great gift or vision for his vocation. He was competent enough to provide a living while he pursued serving the people he met. The Apostle Paul worked as a tentmaker to supply his need while he preached in some communities (Acts 18:3, 20:33-34). Paul produced no great innovation in tent-making. He simply provided the needed support to pursue his primary calling. His vocation, tentmaker, was secondary.

Do you understand your call? Are you fulfilling your life-purpose? Is your vocation the primary or secondary means through which you pursue the world's redemption?

Like our Father in heaven, we have the great privilege and gift of work. Like him, we must face a terrible curse that affects it. Like him, our work is our glory. Some of us have the privilege of working as parents. All of us can work as neighbors. Every believer is to work as a priest. However, the greatest truth is that none of us work alone. Our heavenly father calls us to partnership in his work. What a blessed day of labor! What a terrific day of rest!