

## **Sacred Labor** **Colossians 3:22-24**

**August 30 & 31, 2014**  
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We have a couple of exciting weekends ahead for our church. Next weekend is the groundbreaking of the new auditorium at our Cedar Lake campus. We anticipate that construction to last nine months or so. We are excited about that facility as a ministry tool in Southwest Lake County. Next week is our first small step in taking leadership at our new church campus in the Hobart/Portage community. This campus will be referred to as *Bethel Church – Hobart/Portage campus*. We debated what to call it as it is right in between both cities, but Hobart/Portage or HP campus made the most sense. We have a launch team of about 120 people who will begin worshipping there next Sunday. We will be in process of identifying leadership, remodeling, and bringing our church DNA there.

In two weeks, on September 14, is the grand opening of our Gary campus and there are special plans in the works to celebrate it. They had almost 200 people there last week. So it hasn't been a bad two weeks around here at Bethel Church. Groundbreaking at one campus, soft launching at another campus, and a grand opening at a third campus.

This holiday weekend marks the end of the summer and beginning of fall. Our fall teaching will begin next week. So what to speak on over Labor Day weekend? You may be surprised to find out that Labor Day is not honoring women who have given birth, although they certainly deserve any number of days for accomplishing that feat. Labor Day celebrates vocation and work. It goes all the way back to 1887 and President Grover Cleveland. I think some of you here may have voted for him. The name of this weekend provides an excellent opportunity to think theologically about an area of life many Christians fail to connect to the gospel.

Does God care about our work? What we do? How we do it? One reason this is so critical is the sheer amount of time we spend working. The average person will work between 80,000 and 100,000 hours in their lifetime; five to six days out of every week; twelve months a year. We dedicate a huge portion of our life to vocation. Is my work outside the realm of my faith or is work also something God transforms by the gospel in us? Let's talk about our faith and living it out in all of our days of labor.

### **Why is Work Sacred?**

#### **God himself is a worker**

- *"Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation."* (Genesis 2:1-3 ESV, emphasis added)
- *"But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is working until now, and I am working.'"* (John 5:17)

God is a worker. The fact that he rested in creation shows that for six days he truly worked. We looked at this in our *Ten Commandments* series and the fourth command to keep the Sabbath holy. (Exodus 20:8) Do you remember? God rested on the seventh day, not because he was tired, but to establish a creation rhythm for us to follow. Even God didn't work seven days a week; who are you to think you can? And why would you want to unless driven by some idolatry? Some of you think you are demigods. You are not. Our God is a God who makes both work and Sabbath renewal sacred and holy by his own example.

*My Father is working and so am I.* What is that about? It is essentially a claim to deity by Jesus. The rabbinic teaching was that God worked every day to uphold the universe. For Jesus to say, the God of the universe is working and so am I was to claim a place and role in the upholding of the universe. As we saw in our message last week, Jesus is the one who holds all realities and diversities in unity—"In him all things hold together." (Colossians 1:17)

Does that qualify as work? We struggle to hold our little lives together and it exhausts us, much less the universe. God the Father is working. Jesus is working. The Holy Spirit is working. God is a God of work. It is therefore good and sacred and holy.

### **God commanded us to 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.'" (Genesis 1:28)*

This is commonly called the creation mandate. God creates a beautiful place, a garden, puts Adam and Eve in it, and tells them to get busy. Why? Gardens need cultivating. A good gardener can produce food and order and beauty that a garden left to itself won't.

This whole world is a garden. The creation mandate is that we fill it and subdue it. We fill it by reproduction and we subdue it with sweat. We are to cultivate it. God built into it incredible capacities which we are to discover and use for the common good. We don't create anything as much as we discover it. Think of medicine as an example. All these medicinal properties were created by God and placed in the Garden. But it took research and effort to draw out the healing of penicillin and other healing drugs.

The first thing Adam did was work. He was created and given a job. God told him to name the animals. That was both work and an indication of dominion in creation. But it shows that working—doing a job—has been part of God's plan for humanity from the beginning.

Notice that this command comes before the Fall! Many people think work is a *result* of the Fall. The curse of sin means that this garden is not as easily cultivated and it takes great effort to provide our necessities. But work is, and always has been, inherently good. Working is part of being human. It provides a sense of accomplishment and contribution to society, even in the smallest of ways. God made us for that. Ecclesiastes says "*Sweet is the sleep of the laborer.*" (Ecclesiastes 5:12) Work is good.

How important is work? In God's top ten commands, it's in his top five. "*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor.*" (Exodus 20:8-9) We just studied this last spring. Yes, this is a command to rest and refresh. We talked about the creation rhythm God established and why rest is as important as work. This is a hedge against thinking that I am what I do or allowing busyness to define me. It applies directly to those of us who have no margin for people, service, or smelling the roses. However, don't miss

that it says we *should* work. "*Six days shall you labor.*" We are made to do something with our lives. Work is good and holy.

Everything I have said would have sounded radical and crazy in the past. If we go back into history in Western Europe, it was commonly believed that there was *sacred* work and there was *secular* work. The sacred work was the work of the monks, the nuns, the priests, and the clergy. These vocations meant life-work that inherently pleased God. It could be done to God's glory. In fact, it was the only work that God actually cared about. The shoemaker and the blacksmith and the farmer were destined to spend their whole working life doing nothing that mattered to God.

Something dramatic happened that changed all of it. We call it the Reformation. In the early 1500s Martin Luther began teaching what we would call, the actual gospel. *Sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone as authority. *Sola Fide*—salvation by faith alone. *Sola Gratia*—salvation by grace alone. The reformation was the recovery of the true gospel and its proclamation had dramatic effect for centuries around the world. Many things were reformed including a biblical worldview of work.

- "A cobbler, a smith, a farmer, each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and every one by means of his own work or office must benefit and serve every other, that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, even as all the members of the body serve one another." (Martin Luther)
- "...We know that men were created for the express purpose of being employed in labor of various kinds, and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when every man applies diligently to his own calling, and endeavors to live in such a manner as to contribute to the general advantage." (John Calvin)

Guess what happened as a result of this teaching? The cobbler, who used to go to work and think it didn't mean anything, now went to work and thought, *God cares about my cobbling!* The farmer headed to milk the cows and had in his mind, *God cares about the way I do this. I can actually bring him pleasure. I can milk my cows to the glory of God.* What an amazing difference the gospel makes wherever it is integrated into our lives, including my vocation.

Do you think that way as you work in the marketplace or school or in the home? God cares about my cobbling, my mothering or fathering, my truck driving, my schooling. Students, school is your job. Learning is your job. What if you went to school with the thought, *God delights when I work hard. Today my job is school. Someday it will be a different job. The habits and determination I am applying today are forming me into the kind of worker I will be for my whole life.* In terms of character forming, tomorrow at school might be a day that in a small way shapes your whole life.

I remember my college roommate who played on the college baseball team. There was a pitcher on the team who was studying to be a teacher, but he never studied or put any effort into his education. My friend asked him, "Larry, how are you ever going to be a teacher if you don't study?" His response is classic, "What, didn't you have any bad teachers in school?" Where is Larry today? Let's hope NOT teaching anyone. I remember being told that my papers and schoolwork that I turned in said a little something about me. Make them the best they can be. Over time, character is formed around doing things well, which will serve you the rest of your life...IF you do it for the right reasons. Stay tuned.

People talk about the Judeo-Christian work ethic. The initiative of America. The get-it-done spirit that created industries and won World War II. Where did that come from? Trace it back all the way to a former monk applying the gospel to labor and work. It created an entire new way of looking at work whose effect lingers to this day.

This can be lost and we see it being lost in our generation as a worldview of entitlement creeps across the land. Obviously, we must push back against that. How? Truth.

### **How Should I Work?**

*"Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ."* (Colossians 3:22-24)

The context here is first-century slavery which is a matter all its own. For the sake of our time, let's see that in principle this applies to all of us.

### **Submissive to workplace authority**

All authority is God's authority and most workplaces involve relationships of responsibility. This isn't bad. The building of the temple had a vast army of leaders and laborers and many of Jesus' parables involved landowners, workers, and compensation.

Employees here are called to an attitude of submission to those in authority. This is both an action and an attitude. I think we all know what this means and why the bitter complaining in the break rooms is no place for Christians. You might say, *But you don't know how bad it is!* Remember, this was written to first-century Christian slaves. If they can apply it in slavery, we can apply it in our modern day employment.

### **Diligent/industrious**

- *"Whatever you do, work heartily."* (Colossians 3:23)
- *"...knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ."* (Colossians 3:24)
- *"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might."* (Ecclesiastes 9:10)

Why would God care about the way I work when I am at work—the quality of my work; my energy; my enthusiasm; my ethic? Why does God care? Remember, the goal of the Father is to turn us into little Jesuses; to conform us to his likeness. That includes every aspect of life, even work, and even the quality of the work we offer our employer. We have to see our work as worship. The cobbler is as much worshipping God when he makes shoes as when he sings or prays to God.

Students, the quality of that paper you turn in or your science fair project says something about your view of God. Make your volcano explode to the glory of God. That's what the real ones do. This is where it's so exciting to consider the difference our faith can make in our lives—to see all of it as worship.

I was so proud some time ago when I was told about a local business that employs a number of our teenagers. Apparently there was a young woman who worked there. She

watched the Bethel teens work and listened to how they talked and she said, *That's the church for me.* She now serves faithfully here each week.

Would anybody at your work or school be surprised to find out you are a Christian? Would the quality of your effort on the job be a positive or a negative for the name of Christ?

"If it falls to your lot to be a street sweeper, go on out and sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures; sweep streets like Handel and Beethoven composed music; sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry; sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper, who swept his job well.'" (Martin Luther King Jr., *"The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life."* Sermon at New Covenant Baptist Church, Chicago, IL. April 9, 1967.)

### **We All Work for the Undercover Boss**

*"You are serving the Lord Christ."* (Colossians 3:24)

If I asked you, who's your boss? you might instinctively say, *Sam Jones, Susan Smith,* or whoever it might be. Christianity has a different answer. Yes, we all have human bosses. But we work for someone else. Our true boss is Jesus. That may sound sanctimonious but it simply is the truth. This is also a great hope for those of us who may have terrible bosses. Tyrant bosses. Crude and rude. Stingy and negative. How do you bear up under that?

*I have another boss. His opinion is the real one that matters.* "You are serving the Lord Christ." What's that mean? While I may work at NIPSCO or US Steel or Merrillville Schools or wherever, the true person I am trying to please in the quality of my attitude and work is Christ. Here's the thing, any employee who offers quality work to Christ will be one of the finest employees of any company and we should have all of them lined up outside our door to hire. From what I hear, they would be wise to start with our teenagers. It is critical we work knowing who our real boss is.

I'm sure most of us have seen the TV show, *Undercover Boss.* On this show, the CEO of a large company disguises himself and spends a few weeks working the docks or the assembly line or out in the field. He works with his own employees, but they don't know the boss is there watching them. The show ends with the CEO calling in each employee and revealing his true identity. He then gives them either commendation and reward or in some cases, fires their hindquarters right out the door. Everyone works differently when the boss is around.

*"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward."* (Colossians 3:23-24)

This message is urging you to take your boss to work with you. Take your boss to school with you. Take your boss with you as you work in the home. Realize that Jesus is the one you are serving no matter what you do. How would you work differently if your earthly boss was watching over your shoulder? How much more should we work with all our hearts when we see Jesus as our CEO who is watching as we work? As this passage says, someday he is going to reward us or not for the quality of the work we offer to him as worship.

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