

Work

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[0 : 01] Well, again, let me say welcome to all of you, and in particular those of you who may be joining us for the first time. We're glad to gather here as we do every week. We're glad for this time in the service when we can turn our attention to God's Word.

We've been in a series over the last few weeks called Foundations, where we've been asking foundational questions about what it means to be human beings, how to make sense of the world that we live in, and ultimately how to understand the God who made all of this.

The idea being that if we understand how things were made and why they were made, then we'll know how to make sense of them today, including all of the various aspects of our lives.

And so last week we started looking at this rhythm that God establishes in creation, and this rhythm is a part of what it means to be human.

It's a part of our design to live out this rhythm, and that is the rhythm of rest and work, Sabbath rest and work. And as we said last week, working all of the time dehumanizes us.

[1 : 17] It's dehumanizing. And working none of the time, never working, also dehumanizes us. That what we see in creation is that we were created for a rhythm of both rest and work.

And last week we took a look at the first part of this, Sabbath rest, and this week we're looking at the second component, which is our work. And for most of us here in D.C., when I bring up work, I think I don't have to convince you that work is absolutely central to our lives.

It is central to how we organize our time. It's central to how we think of our identities. I think we probably, if we're honest, spend more time working or thinking about work than virtually anything else.

One of the curses that we all seem to have fallen under is that when we are at work, we are thinking about everything but work. And when we're away from work, we're thinking about nothing but work. It's almost perverse, and yet I think this is true for all of us.

I think we said last week that the Washington Post said this year that we are, Washington, D.C., rather, that we have the second highest average work week, the second longest average work week of any city in the United States.

[2 : 35] That's pretty impressive, depending on your scale of impressiveness. I think most of us, if we're honest, work pretty much determines everything else about our lives.

It determines our relationships. It determines our priorities. I think for most of us, work is what brought us to D.C., and for those of us who leave, it will probably be work or something work-related that takes us away.

So I think it's obvious that we need to reevaluate on a major level our relationship with our work. And this starts by asking, what's the foundation?

How should we think about our jobs, our vocation? What does our work have to do with being human? And that's why we're looking at Genesis chapter 2. We're looking at two verses in particular.

Chapter 2, verse 5, and then we'll skip down and look at verse 15. So I'll read those two verses. When no bush of the field was yet in the land, and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground.

[3 : 41] We'll stop right there. We'll move down to verse 15. The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work and to keep it. So we're going to look at these two verses, and we're going to see three things about our work.

We're going to see the necessity of work. We're going to see the distortion of work. How does it become so distorted? And then lastly, the rebalancing of our work.

So the necessity of work, the distortion of work, and the rebalancing of work in our lives, how that happens. Let's pray. Lord, we do thank you and recognize that you not only promise your presence, but you promise your voice.

And we know that apart from you, these would be merely human words, interpreting words on a page, but that through your Spirit, you actually speak through your Word to us.

And, Lord, I know I need to hear from you tonight, and we all need to hear from you tonight, and we pray that by your grace we would, for our good and ultimately for your glory.

[4 : 48] In your Son's name, amen. So first of all, as we look at these passages, we see the necessity of work, that work is actually a necessary component of a healthy life and what it means to be a human being.

Essentially, we see this, that in the beginning there was work. If you look at the story of creation, we see, first of all, God going to work. And we've looked at this in previous weeks.

We see God going to work precisely by what? He encounters chaos and void, in other words, undifferentiated matter, and He goes to work.

And He begins to order the chaos. He begins to bring order. He creates the light and separates it from the dark, day and night. He creates the expanse above, the waters above and the waters below and an expanse in between.

And then He creates the land and separates it from the sea. And we see God ordering creation.

And the fruit of God's labor is that chaos and death and meaninglessness becomes a cosmos.

[5 : 56] We see domains established where life can not only exist, but it can flourish. Ideal conditions for the flourishing of all manner of life.

This is the work that God's doing. And we see here that God is in some ways the ultimate entrepreneur, creating something that wasn't there before.

He's in the business of creation. But then very quickly in Genesis chapter 2 verse 5, the first problem arises in creation. And that problem is in verse 5.

Everything's in place. Everything's good. Everything's been pronounced good. And yet, there is no one to work the ground. That's a problem. And we need to understand the significance of this.

That the story actually begins by God creating and ordering a world that is by definition unfinished. It's by definition incomplete.

[6 : 56] See, He could have created the world as a complete thing. But He chooses to create a world that is full of potential. But that potential, the stuff of creation, is only in seed form.

It's an acorn. And it needs to be cultivated. It needs to be built. It needs to grow into the fullness of what it was created to be.

And for that, God creates human beings. And that's a fascinating departure from the other ancient Near Eastern myths.

Which essentially state that the gods, normally through violence, slitting the throats of other gods and filleting their corpses and slinging them into the sky. That's a Numa Elish.

And the gods are, you know, work is so far beneath them that they need someone to uphold and to maintain this.

[7 : 59] And so, human beings, these lowly creatures are created to sort of, because gods would never work. Or we see the Greek and Roman philosophers abhorring the idea of work and saying, you should do whatever you can to not work.

Because it's all about the richness of the mind and the cultivation of the mind and labor, special mental labor. That's below you. And yet we see here that God is actually doing work, and then he's creating human beings to continue the same kind of work.

This work of creating and cultivating and actualizing the potential of the world that he's made. And this, I think, not only departs from the ancient stories, it departs from our modern myth of a happy life.

Most people I went to school with said, I want to go to school, I want to make a lot of money, I want to retire as soon as I can. And the goal of all this is so that I can not work. You know, retire as early as you can so that you can do everything that you want to do.

The assumption being nobody in their right mind would actually want to work. And there's a funny insight, I've always loved that movie WALL-E, and the statement that it makes, or rather the picture that it paints of what human beings would look like if we took a permanent hiatus from work for multiple generations.

[9 : 18] These humans have, I won't say evolved, devolved into slug-like creatures that have tiny little baby arms and legs, and they can no longer stand on their own strength, and so they're carried around all day on floating chairs.

And one of the great victories of the movie is when the captain is actually able to stand up on his own two feet, more physical exertion than he's probably ever done in his life. So human beings are actually created to work, and the Bible actually says that God made us and this world in such a way that our work is necessary.

It's necessary for us. Work is as much a part of your basic human needs as food or sleep. You're created to need work.

So we need it, and also the work is necessary for the world, because God made a world that needs our care. It needs to be developed and maintained by human beings. So this is the way God designed things.

But, as you're probably thinking, this is not exactly the beautiful, harmonious way in which the world actually functions today. And you're right. God created things to function this way, but things have become, you might say, a bit distorted.

[10 : 35] Our work has become distorted. We just looked at how work was created to be, but that assumes that human beings have a right relationship with God.

And if human beings did, then this is how work would function in the world. But the problem is, human beings on their own don't have a right relationship with God. And here's the simple fact. When your relationship with God is distorted, all of your other relationships become distorted. It's just simply the way it works. The distortion flows into every other area of life, including our relationship with our work.

And apart from God, there are two primary ways, I think, that our work becomes distorted. It becomes distorted when we believe, or we come to believe more and more, that our work is meaningless. That's a distortion. Apart from God.

And also, apart from God, I think that some of us can tend toward the distortion of thinking that our work is a source of meaning. So I want to look at both of these. I think these are two of the primary distortions that affect most of us in how we think about our jobs.

[11 : 41] The first distortion, apart from God, is that we believe that our work is meaningless. I think some of us, as we're listening to this and maybe rolling your eyes and thinking, oh, all this talk about work, and the last thing I want to do on a Sunday night in my last few precious hours, before I go to sleep and have to wake up earlier than I would like and go to work, the last thing I want to do is think about work.

And why do you think that? Because when you go to work, you think, you look at all of the work that you do, you look at the fact that you're sitting behind a desk all day, maybe answering emails, and maybe they're not even your own emails.

Maybe it's somebody else's emails. Or you're a part of this massive bureaucracy, and you look at the labor that you pour in, and it feels like water on sand, and you think, I'm not making any difference, any dent, any impact.

My boss doesn't even know my name. I feel like a number. And some of us think this, and some of us feel meaningless in our jobs. We struggle to be motivated.

And, you know, when you feel like that, it's tempting to begin to fantasize about other jobs that would give you more meaning. It's tempting to begin to think about jobs in terms of the relative meaningfulness that they might offer you.

[12 : 58] You may think of certain jobs as being more meaningful, and other jobs as being less meaningful, whether you think of sacred versus secular jobs, or you think of helping professions, or you think of nonprofit versus for-profit, or all of the different, I would say, artificial divisions in vocation in terms of meaningfulness, but we begin to think that way.

But here's the key as we understand creation. All work has meaning, and all work has dignity. But here's the key. It's your work does not have meaning because of what you produce.

What you produce has value, and hopefully it's adding value somewhere, but that's not the source of the meaningfulness of your work. Your work doesn't have meaning because of what it produces. It has meaning because of the one whom it reflects. That's where the meaning come from. So our work reflects a God who made all things and sustains all things, and a God who made us to reflect His image in the sustaining, the cultivating, the creating out of what He's made.

So just as we see God bringing order to chaos, making it possible for life to flourish, we continue in the work of what? Bringing order to chaos. So those of you who work in NGO worlds, or in non-profit, or international development spheres, those of you who do that kind of work, you are trying to get resources from this place to this place.

[14:32] You're looking and trying to understand the problems that result in poverty and oppression, and you're trying to funnel resources and to develop strategies to what? To bring order to chaos.

You're bringing order to chaos. You're trying to create a society or to create a community where life can flourish better than it is. If you start a business, or you code and you build software, or you develop strategies and different ways of thinking, you're taking the stuff of creation, and you're making something that wasn't there before.

You're reflecting the image of a creator God. When you do that, you say, well, I build websites.

That's an act of creation? Yes. That's an act of creation. If you manage people or you manage teams, you're bringing order to priorities and people to maximize and draw out their potential.

If you teach, teachers, their whole job is to cultivate like you would cultivate a garden and to draw the potential out of their students. Musicians take disparate, disordered sound and they bring order and produce beautiful melody.

Artists take disparate stuff and they order it and create beautiful things like paintings and sculptures.

People who work in hospitality or customer service create what?

[15:57] Experiences. You create encounters. You have the opportunity to serve and to treat another human being with humanizing dignity even when they're behaving in an undignified way.

People who are administrative assistants serve and empower those that they work for. You bring order to details. You bring order to emails. You bring order to schedules. You facilitate relationships and connections and enhance productivity.

You're like the fertilizer that makes everybody else do their job better. Right? I actually believe that stay-at-home parents and homemakers are probably the clearest reflection of the divine image in that they are actually creating and maintaining a place where life can flourish, a home.

They're nurturing and sustaining human life for those who have children. They're forming the souls and the characters of human beings. All of these kinds of work, and these are just tiny, just a few examples, they're all ways in which we, in our work, are reflecting a creator God.

But the key to sensing and seeing the meaning in your work, the key is this, don't measure meaning by what you produce. Measure meaning by the one whom you reflect.

[17:18] Don't measure meaning by what you produce. Measure meaning by the one whom you reflect. In a fallen world, as Genesis 3 says, there will be thorns and thistles.

There will be futility. There will be resistance. There will be days and stretches of time when our productivity is very low or even in the negative. Don't measure it by that.

Measure it by the one whom you reflect when you're working in the image of Him who made you.

So that's distortion number one, coming to believe, apart from God, that my work has no meaning.

All work has meaning. Distortion number two goes in the other direction, believing that our work is actually the source of meaning. My work gives me meaning. It gives me identity. And this, in D.C., when the first or second question you're asked is what do you do, there is that immediate assumption that the most important thing about you, maybe even more so than your name, is your career.

Are you somebody that I should be talking to? Or should I excuse myself to get another drink from the bar and find somebody more important? What you do defines who you are in our culture.

[18:28] You know, there's that great, often used, but never overused example, in my opinion, of chariots of fire. And Harold Abraham, you've heard many preachers, including me, use this a zillion times, and it's because it's a great example.

Harold, that's the disclaimer, Harold Abraham is a runner. He and Eric Little are sort of rivals. And Harold Abraham is, he runs the dash, and he says of the dash, he says that when that gun goes off, he says, I have ten seconds to justify my existence.

And I think it's a great example because I do think that in many ways that reflects the distortion that occurs in our hearts over time. That my ability to do this thing justifies my existence.

If I'm not able to do this thing, then what am I? You know, especially people in the helping professions. You get all these degrees and all these credentials that say, this person's good at

helping.

And then you get a job in social work. And you try to help people. And you realize how hard it is. And you realize that a lot of times people don't appreciate you.

[19 : 39] And they actually resent that they even need help. And you give what you think is great advice, learned advice, advice that you've read in books and learned from prior experience of what would be good in this or that situation.

And they reject your advice. How dare they? And you think, well, what worth am I?

So we sacrifice our relationships. We sacrifice sanity. We sacrifice our own health for our work. We're never content. We're always wondering about other jobs that might do a better job at justifying us.

Many of us wait, many of us wait to even think about getting married. You wait to even think about getting married until our career is secure. And then we begin to look around and realize that the pool of eligible partners has dwindled somewhat since undergrad.

And we wonder, what happened? You know, for those of us who are unemployed or underemployed, you struggle not just with a lack of income, you struggle with a lack of identity.

[20 : 46] But the problem is, our work was never meant to be a source of meaning in the first place. And if we spend our life trying to find meaning, identity, purpose in our jobs, it will lead to profound disillusionment.

The late Lens Redding is a great example of this. He is a New Zealand-based or was a New Zealand-based art director, advertising guru. By every standard, he had achieved success in a very cool and sexy field.

And he died at age 52 from inoperable esophageal cancer. And after being diagnosed, things began to shift for him.

And he wrote an essay that was published after his death called, A Short Lesson in Perspective. So I want to read an excerpt from this, and it's edited somewhat for language.

He says, And here's the thing. It turns out I didn't actually like my old life nearly as much as I thought I did. I know this now because I occasionally catch up with my old colleagues and workmates.

[21 : 55] They fall over each other to enthusiastically show me the latest project they're working on, ask my opinion, proudly show off their technical prowess, which is not inconsiderable. I find myself glazing over but politely listening as they brag about who's had the least sleep and the most takeaway food.

I haven't seen my wife since January. I can't feel my legs anymore. I think I have scurvy. But another three weeks and we'll be done. It's got to be done by then.

The client's going on holiday. What do I think? And he says, What do I think? I think you're all effing mad. Deranged. So disengaged from reality it's not even funny.

It's an effing TV commercial. Nobody cares. And he says, This has come as quite a shock, I can tell you. I think I've come to the conclusion that the whole thing was a bit of a con.

A scam. An elaborate hoax. Countless late nights and weekends. Holidays. Birthdays. School recitals.

[23 : 02] Anniversary dinners were willingly sacrificed at the altar of some intangible but infinitely worthy higher cause. It would all be worth it in the long run. This was the con.

Convincing myself that there was nowhere I'd rather be was just a coping mechanism. I can see that now. It wasn't really important or of any consequence at all, really.

How could it be? We were just shifting product. Our product and the clients. Just meeting the quota. Feeding the beast, as I called it on my more cynical days. So was it worth it? Well, of course not.

It turns out it was just advertising. So the point is, on the one hand, I want to impress upon you this fact that work, our work, all work, has inherent dignity, inherent meaning, inherent worth.

But on the other hand, our work can never be a source of meaning and of value and of worth. And that altar that Lens Redding talks about, that altar on which so many of us sacrifice so many things, so many people, so many possibilities, that is an altar to an empty idol.

[24 : 25] And the idol of work is just like any other idol. It never, ever, ever promises, or never, ever, ever delivers what it promises. So this brings us to the third point then.

If that's the, if work is necessary and work does have inherent meaning, but that meaning, it's not a source of meaning. The meaning comes from the one whom we reflect when we work.

If these are true things, then we have to ask, how do we then rebalance work? Because I know myself, and I know most of you well enough to know that I think that our work lives are pretty out of whack.

So knowing this, how do we rebalance work in our lives and maintain this balance over time so that we don't slide into meaningless despair, so that we don't sacrifice ourselves on the altar of our jobs. And this is actually where last week's sermon and this week come together. And for those of you who weren't here last week, I can sort of bring us back up to speed on that, that the only way to have a healthy, balanced work life is if that life is part of a larger rhythm of work and rest, work and Sabbath rest.

[25 : 38] That's the only way. And as we said last week, Sabbath is much more than just taking a day off. Taking a day off is kind of and can be a counterfeit Sabbath because it's not just about taking a day off.

Sabbath means ceasing from our work so that we can celebrate God's work. It's a reorienting of our souls.

Ceasing our work so that we can celebrate God's work. And this only fully makes sense when we look at Jesus Christ because in Mark chapter 2, verse 28, Jesus says something profound.

He says, I am the Lord of the Sabbath. The Son of the Man is Lord of the Sabbath. What is He saying? I'm the Lord of rest. I'm the one to whom the Sabbath points.

When the Sabbath was established in creation, it was a giant signpost pointing to the rest that I would one day make possible. So when Jesus dies on the cross and He cries out, it is finished, He's not just talking about His heart.

[26 : 43] He's not just talking about His earthly life. When He cries out, it is finished, He's saying that He has now accomplished everything necessary to give us that rest.

He's done everything necessary to reconcile us to God. And in that reconciliation, we know, as we come into the embrace of that God, we know that we have found the only place in the universe where we can know that everything's going to be okay, that we don't have to strive any longer, that there's nothing that we lack, that our future is uncertain.

All of that is done away with. And every Sabbath is an opportunity for us to gather as we are now, to cease from our work, and if any of you are working right now on your devices, cease just for right now.

Because right now, at this minute, it's an opportunity for us to gather as Christians and to celebrate the finished work of God on our behalf, to actually remember that all of our hope and all of our meaning and all of our purpose will never be found in this world, especially in our work, and it can only be found in Jesus.

So in light of this, in light of the Lord of the Sabbath and what we have, those of us who have come to Him and put our hope not in our work but in His finished work, that's what makes you a Christian. In light of this, what's a balanced perspective on work actually look like?

[28 : 18] What does it actually look like? How should we think about our work as you go to work, most of you, tomorrow? And I would say a balanced perspective on work looks like this. It's all wrapped up in the word that the Bible uses for work.

The word that the Bible uses here in Genesis chapter 2 for work. The Hebrew word is avodah.

Avodah. And this first appears in our passage, but it's used all throughout the Old Testament.

And in the Old Testament, if you look at all the ways it's used, if you do a word search, you'll find something pretty fascinating and that is this word has three interrelated usages.

It has three ways or three ways that it's translated in the Old Testament. It's translated as work or labor or career or occupation. That's the first meaning.

That's the one that we're most familiar with. But it's also used to describe service as in serving one another, being a servant. And then thirdly, it's used to describe worship.

[29 : 24] Worship. So in the Bible, what you see in this one word is that there is a seamless connection, a seamless understanding of the relationship between our work, our career, our vocation, our call to serve one another, and our purpose as worshipers of God.

And what we see is that those aren't three separate activities. I don't worship on Sunday, serve at the soup kitchen on Wednesday, and then work Monday to Friday. That instead, my work is a place where I worship.

And my work is a place where I have opportunities to serve other people and the Lord. So work and worship and service, they're all one and the same.

Your work is your worship. And for most of us, your primary place of ministry, your primary place of evangelism, your primary place of service, your primary place of bringing justice, your primary place of bringing glory to God and worshiping the Lord, the primary place you're going to do that is your job.

That's the primary place. And so while we as a church have ways that we serve initiatives like DUC 127, while we encourage our core groups to come up with ways that they want to serve together in the community, we never want to lose sight of the fact that your primary calling is to the Lord Jesus Christ and next to that you are called to a vocation and that is the way that God has built you and provided you an opportunity to do His mission in the world.

[31 : 01] That is it. And so if nothing else, for all of our core groups who, you know, who think that they need to come up with an elaborate vision for serving, no, it is enough for you to simply say our group exists to support and empower our people to see their jobs as the primary way that they serve and worship the Lord.

That's a great focus for a core group because that is what our vocation means, Avodah. And when you see someone who lives this balance of work and rest, someone who has their work life in balance and sees it as Avodah, sees it as a way to serve and to glorify God, when you see a life like that, what you see is someone who's been liberated from their work so that they may fully enjoy their work.

And I'll just give you two quick examples to close of people who have this kind of understanding of their Avodah, their work. The first is the other character in Chariots of Fire, Eric Little.

We have Harold Abraham who says, I have ten seconds to justify my existence, and we have Eric Little, a very talented runner. And in the story, one of the, you know, a medal race comes up.

It's a race where they can medal, but this medal race is held on the Sabbath. And so Eric Little, follower of Jesus that he is, Sabbath keeper that he is, says, I'm not going to do it.

[32 : 28] And he doesn't race. And Harold Abraham ends up racing, ends up eventually winning the medal that he's worked so long for, but in the end he realizes it's just a medal.

And it doesn't satisfy him the way he thought it would. He's a lot like Linz Redding who says, it's just a commercial. It's just advertising. It wasn't worth it.

And then by contrast, you see Eric who goes on to serve and love the people of China for years before being put in a Japanese prison camp where he eventually dies. And a few years ago it was found out that he was actually given an opportunity to leave that camp, but he traded places with a pregnant woman.

And so she went free and he ended up dying in the camp. And the world looks at a story like this and says, what a waste, what a colossal waste. But when Eric describes the reason he runs, it's not to get medals, it's not to get fame, it's not to get acclamation, it's not to get money.

He says, when I run, I feel God's smile. This is Avodah. That's what it looks like in a life. And the second example, the last example I'll give is the life of Lilius Trotter.

[33 : 42] We've been immersed in this story, this amazing story of Lilius Trotter because my wife has actually made a documentary about Lilius Trotter, so I may be a little biased, but I think when you see the story for yourself, you will understand the beauty of it.

And it will actually be premiering here in D.C. on February 6th at the National Gallery of Art. So that's pretty exciting. So our church will be a part of that.

But when you look at the life of Lilius Trotter, here's a woman who was a very gifted painter who was told by the great art critic of her day in England, John Ruskin, you can be England's greatest living painter.

I have the power to bestow that upon you, and you have the talent. I can open the right doors for you, make all the right connections, one condition. See, Lilius had been spending a lot of her free time serving the poor of London, the women and the orphans.

And Ruskin saw this as being in competition with her art and said, you have to stop that. You have to leave all of that and devote yourself exclusively to your art.

[34 : 53] And if you do that, I will make you England's greatest living painter. She takes three days of prayer and discernment and ultimately refuses Ruskin. But the greatest thing about the story is she doesn't actually give up her vocation as a painter.

She continues to paint. What she gives up is fame. What she gives up is the chance at notoriety. She gives all that up, not because fame is inherently bad, but because for her, for her, the sacrifice would mean sacrificing what it means to be faithful to God.

And when she had to choose, she chose faithfulness over fame. And where that took her, it doesn't need to take all of us here, but where it took her is actually to North Africa.

And she spent the rest of her life in total obscurity as a missionary in Algeria. Painting, painting, growing as an artist, but painting not for the elite art critics of England, but rather painting for an audience of one in the margins of her journals.

Like Eric Little, she had a balanced view of her vocation. She saw her work as a way to serve others. She actually used her painting to illuminate Arab text to try to convey to the Arab world the beauty of Jesus.

[36 : 24] And she knew that they took the word seriously. They took the written word very seriously. And so she used her watercolor abilities to create beautiful tracts that would tell people about Jesus.

Because that's what she believed that she was called to do. So as we gather together tonight on this Sabbath day, may the Lord rebalance the way we see our work.

that we would see it as Avodah, that we would see that all of our work reflects the God who made us in his image to work. That we would see how we're called both to serve those around us and to glorify God in all that we do.

And I pray that we would all gain a vision for that and what it looks like in our lives. And Lord, as we do ask you to bless us in this, we ask you to enable us, as your word says, to give us everything that we need to accomplish the work that you've prepared for us beforehand, that we should walk in those good works.

We pray for your, not only your vision, but also the empowering presence of your spirit to help us live lives of faithfulness, Lord. And we ask this in your Son's holy name.

[37 : 37] Amen.