

God's good gift of work

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[0:00] Amen. We'll leave our reading there. Now I want to begin with the essayist and novelist Dorothy Sayers who shortly after World War II wrote a really influential article or extended essay I suppose called Why Work.

It recognising here after war is a chance for Britain as a state and society to rethink our whole approach to economics, to the economic system but also how we think about work and its value. It's a really helpful essay. You can find it freely available online. Just to highlight this extended quote which I think picks up so much that's helpful.

Work should be looked upon, wrote Sayers, not as a necessary drudgery undergone for the purpose of making money but as a way of life in which the nature of man finds its proper exercise and delight and so fulfil itself to the glory of God.

That it should in fact be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of work itself. And that man made in God's image should make things as God makes them for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing.

[1:44] Now I don't know about you but I think that's a brilliant summary in part of some of our struggles with work. That sense of drudgery, I'm doing this because there's bills to pay.

But also I think it captures some of the best joys and longings that we have as we approach our work. So I would commend the essay in its entirety to you.

And I think we're going to pick up some of those principles as we go along. Because here we are still in the beginning, early chapters of Genesis. And we've got these early principles about why we work and how we are to work.

Now you maybe noticed Genesis 2 verse 4, we're getting a shift. We're getting a different take on God's creative work.

In chapter 1 we had the wide angle view. Here is God the almighty maker of heaven and earth and here is how he made the universe. But now we're going to see how the Lord God, notice that the name of God changes throughout chapter 2.

[2:49] It's the Lord God, the personal covenant name of God. How the Lord God works to make people in his image covenant partners.

But also even the focus on what is it that God is creating. He's creating a perfect environment for these first people.

The perfect conditions for where work and life and worship will happen. So in these verses we can detect something of God's design for work.

And as we're using the language of work, just recognize, we'll recognize together that work is, you know, whatever we do, it doesn't have to be our paid work. Any vacation, any calling that we have, that might be as a craftsman.

It might be caring for a family. It might be as someone who goes to school or to university. It might be that we work in a call center. Whatever it is, there are principles that we can apply.

[3:47] And it's good news to know that as we listen to Genesis 2, you and I, we can go to work tomorrow knowing God's smile in our lives through Jesus.

Because we can know ourselves to be working with God. That's the most important thing I think that we can take away today and we see it here in Genesis 2. But we've got four principles that we're going to work through.

They're all kind of basic and they're all here. First principle, we were made to work by God. So in our whole section, Genesis 2, 4 to 17, you probably noticed that the only actor, the only worker in

this section is God himself.

The first man is there. He is present, but he is passive. And so this is another way of reminding us that God is ultimate king. He is the authority.

He is going to set the bounds and the order for life and work for the first man and for everyone who follows. Verse 7 is a hugely significant verse.

[4:48] Let's hear it again together. Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being.

So it's very descriptive imagery. The Lord God works to create an image bearer. God is being pictured as if he were a potter, fashioning and shaping with skill and with care.

It's significant that the first man, we're told, is formed from the dust. It becomes a significant phrase in the Bible. It's often used of someone being raised from the dust and then given a place of honor. In modern English, we have that phrase from rags to riches. There's something similar from dust to honor. Psalm 113 verses 7 and 8.

God raises the poor from the dust and seats them with princes. Or in 1 Kings 16, God speaks to Jehu, a king, and he says, I lifted you up from the dust and I appointed you as ruler.

[5:58] What are we being told about mankind, about us? We have been created again to have royal dignity and honor.

I think that's part of the significance of being formed from the dust. And then we're told that God breathes into his nostrils the breath of life. And this again is saying to us, there is something unique when God creates man.

Mankind alone is given the divine breath for life in these pictures of creation. And so chapter 2 is doing for us in a different way what chapter 1 did, which is to underline the dignity that we have as people who are made in God's image.

All of us have worth and value as image bearers. And there's another aspect to this dignity. We are created to work by the God who works.

We find notes of it throughout our text. Verse 5 is a good place to turn. No shrub had yet appeared and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth.

[7:07] There's one cause why it's not cultivated yet. But here's the second cause. There was no one to work the ground. So in other words, God creates for the purpose of working in his creation.

We need to remind ourselves sometimes that before there was sin, before there was a fall, before everything started to go wrong, by God's good design, there was work. So from the beginning, our capacity to work is one that gives us great dignity.

All work, whether that's work that we're paid for or not. That work is a natural exercise that we undertake because we are people made in the image of God, the creator who works.

By God's design, we steward the earth and its resources. We serve and benefit others in any and all forms of our work because we are made to work by God.

That's fundamental to understanding our attitude to work. Here's a second principle. We were made to work like God. And this is where I think the Dorothy Sayers essay was helpful because it exposed different attitudes that we have as people to work.

[8:33] There are imbalances in our thinking at different times. So for some people, the tendency might be to make work almost like a God.

And Genesis 2 makes clear work is not God. No, work is made by God. But for some, the temptation is to build our identity around work, to overwork, to be a workaholic, to let work set the agenda, the values, the rhythm of our lives.

And so the Bible will say to us, and it will say to us here in Genesis 2, work is not God. But work is also not gross. I didn't have a better G, so we're sticking with it.

Work is not a bad thing. We know that idea. Sometimes we'll talk about work as a necessary evil. Work is what I do for money to pay the bills.

Sometimes work can be that thing that we feel stops us from enjoying our leisure and our pleasure. That's not God's design for work. That's not God's design for our attitude to work.

[9:43] Rather, work is a gift. Always a gift. Yes, there are frustrations. By the time we get to Genesis 3, we discover, yes, there are thorns and thistles.

But there is also a goodness in work for us to enjoy. And sometimes we have to work to find the enjoyment. To think about where is it that I can exercise any form of creativity.

Where is it that my work serves to love and serve and bless others. Where does my work bring benefit to the people around me? Where can I find joy and satisfaction?

Because I get to use different of my skills. Because we're made to work like God. And God's work was very good. And he had joy in it.

So again, in chapter 2, verses 4 to 17, we get a further window into how God works. And that teaches us as image bearers principles and practices of how we are to work.

[10:47] So back to verse 5. And we get that picture of the world as being like a wilderness of not yet being cultivated. That fruitfulness and flourishing is going to take work.

That God is going to need to send rain. But the man is going to have to be involved in work. We saw it in a different way in chapter 1. The earth was in the beginning formless and empty.

And then God works with skill to provide form and filling and life. And as those who are made in his image, as people, we are to practice what the pastor T.J.

Timms calls creative cultivation. We don't create like God creates because God creates out of nothing. But we are to be creative and we are to cultivate.

We are to bring out resources and fruitfulness. By God's design, people are bringing out productivity. Whether that's in a workplace, in a community, in the world in general.

[11:56] Our innovation, our working and cultivating helps to develop and produce resources. Sometimes the extremes of environmentalism will say, the world would be such a better place if only we could get rid of the pesky people.

And we have to say, well, biblically, God says, no, people are planted in this earth to help to bring out some of the productivity. In verses 9 to 14, we're told about the garden that God planted in the east.

Listen to verse 9. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground. Trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. This is the way God creates. This is how God works.

He works to create a world that's full of beauty. That's full of diversity. It's multi-layered. It's really interesting, isn't it, that we're already being told about the gold and the onyx that lives below the surface.

And we're told that when God works to create, there is a generous superabundance. And it's lovely to think of Adam, the first man, working and living, surrounded by God's generosity, God's glory everywhere.

[13:11] The craftsmanship of God on full display, the commitment to God's very good work is abundantly clear as he lives and works the Garden of Eden.

And we are in different ways to image the way that God works. So what can this teach us about thinking of our work? Well, I think it says to us that we are to aim for excellence in whatever it is that we are doing.

We may find ourselves producing a spreadsheet. We may find ourselves developing a piece of technology. We may be bringing order from chaos as we sort out our cupboards or as we sort out company finances.

We may be aiming for flourishing through the work output that we produce. Or through investing in our children. But in all of those and in so many more, we are to aim for excellence in the task that is before us.

Now we maybe kind of get that instinctively. I also think as those made in the image of God, we are called to aim for enjoyment. And I think that's harder.

[14:23] But we are to pursue the satisfaction of being able to recognize a job well done. That is good for us to reflect on.

How is my task, perhaps as small and menial and mundane, how is that serving to benefit and bless others? How can I regard my task, my vocation, my calling as a gift from God to receive well and to enjoy, even when sometimes it's really hard?

And thirdly, we aim to exercise care. Now that's partly in the sense that we give attention to detail. We don't want to do shoddy work. But also we exercise care in terms of working and caring for our

souls are not disconnected.

And so we need to be thinking, how can I connect my working with my service of God? So as image bearers, last week we want to be those who learn to rest well in the completed work of salvation, knowing Jesus has accomplished our salvation and we rest by faith in him.

But we also want to work hard. And we want to take delight and care over the work that we do. Now here's a third principle.

[15:51] We were made to work for God. And this takes us back to the idea of connecting work with worship. There was an interesting feature, perhaps you noticed it. It's throughout the Dorothy Sayers essay.

The significance that she placed on working and finding fulfillment, not as an end in itself, but to the glory of God. We work and enjoy work to the glory of God.

Later on in her article essay, she expressed frustration. When the church focuses attention on here is what the Christian should do on a Sunday.

And spends little attention on what the Christian should do Monday to Saturday in the workplace.

She asked the question, what should the church tell the intelligent carpenter?

And the summary of the answer, the church should tell the intelligent carpenter, make good tables.

What use is it if in the very center of his life and occupation, he is insulting God with bad carpentry?

[17:10] Sayers understood that our work is and ought to be an expression of worship. And in Genesis 2, there are several clues that help us to see that we need to get to grasp this connection between our work and our worship.

So that we understand that a key part of glorifying God is doing good work. Verse 8. So God plants the garden, puts man in the garden to work it.

How is he to work in the garden? This is where things get interesting. Chapter 2, verse 15. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to work it and take care of it.

To work it and to keep it. So chapter 1, people made in the image of God are appointed to rule for God in this world. How are we to do that?

We work it and we care for it. We protect, we guard. In Adam's case, guarding the garden. Fast forward to chapter 3, we see Adam's failure. He didn't guard the garden.

[18:30] Evil came in and everything fell apart. But Adam was made in the beginning to guard and to keep. The beautiful place. The delightful place.

The garden. The place where God was pleased to meet with his people. The place where God would come and walk and talk with his people. Now here's the significant thing.

As the Bible progresses, these same ideas are used of the priests serving God in the temple.

So you get to Numbers chapter 3. It's there on the screen. The priests, the Levites, they were to take care of the furnishings. And to do the work of the tabernacle. Priests, Levites were to guard and keep.

Their work was service. Adam's work was service, was worship. And then you think about what the temple was like. Think about the fabric.

[19:28] Think about the furnishings. The embroidery, the woodwork. You find trees and plants being represented there. God deliberately says that the tabernacle and temple is a picture of the Garden of Eden.

The original meeting place between God and man was in a garden. And so as Adam was working, he was also to be worshiping.

Just like the Old Testament priest. As he worked, he was bringing glory to God by working for God, by representing God, by spreading the glory of God through the earth.

Just as every temple needs a priest, Adam was placed in that original garden temple to enjoy the presence of God.

And that by his work, the glory of God would spread from that garden to fill the earth. And that's why we can say that our work is connected with our worship.

[20:39] So wherever we work, in our homes or outside of them, we are called to do so for God.

We are called, as people made in his image, to represent God, to apply his values to our work.

Whatever we are called to do, we seek to spread something of the glory and the goodness of God

in this world.

As we heard in Colossians 3, whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for men.

It is the Lord Christ you are serving. So all your work can be God's work. We are called to serve God within our work.

And our work is a vital part of our worship. And that takes us towards this fourth principle that we are made to work with God.

[21:49] Now, we recently moved home, as many of you know. And I guess for many of us, when we move to a new house, it involves getting some new furniture. And often that furniture comes flat packed.

And it needs to be constructed. And maybe for the first time, I think, our boys were included in that task. It's like a coming of age ceremony when you get out the IKEA instruction book and you begin to pass that on.

Now, it wasn't something, I guess I probably could have done it by myself. But it was a lot of fun to be able to work together in that way. And in a really significant thing for our dignity and joy in work, there is a pattern established in Genesis 2.

That God works to create a co-worker. The God of the universe, he didn't need someone else to help him to work.

But he chose to invite Adam and then all of us into work. And the joy of working in communion and fellowship with him.

[23:01] So we saw it, we heard it in verse 5. You know, God provides the seed of life. And God will provide the rains. But God wants Adam, God wants man, to supply the labor.

There is the dignity of real responsibility to work and cultivate. And we heard it in verse 8. The Lord God planted a garden and he also planted the man in there to work God's garden for God and with God.

We probably know the idea. We've probably seen it and heard it. Not so much in our culture, but maybe in other cultures of bring your child to work day. Every day is designed by God to bring his child to work day.

God made us to work with him, enjoying communion and fellowship with him in our work. And that takes us to the two trees in the center of the garden and that one test.

End of verse 9. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Verse 16. The Lord God commanded the man, you are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it, you will certainly die.

[24:37] We're going to come back to this when we get to Genesis 3. But for our purposes just now, to recognize one emphasis. What kind of creator is God? What kind of father is God?

He's extremely generous. There's a whole garden that God says yes to. There's only one tree that God says no to. And one tree in the garden is the tree of life.

There is life-giving freedom on offer to Adam if he will gladly live in fellowship and friendship with God. But there's that second tree that represents the one great test.

Will Adam accept God as God? Will he accept that God alone has the right to determine what is good and evil, what is right and wrong?

Will Adam submit to that word? Will he work and worship acknowledging God as his Lord and King?

[25:32] Will he find joy and contentment in working with his God? Because if he does, he will enjoy life. He'll enjoy God's smile on his work.

God will continue to be with him, to walk with him, to talk with him. And do you know when we put it from that positive way? Then we think about that tree with the access denied sign on it.

That's a protection that God gives for Adam's good. Because if Adam will obey, if Adam will say no to what he is supposed to say no to, then life and his work will be enjoyed in communion with his God.

And so the test at the center of the garden, which in a sense becomes the test at the center of our own existence, is will I let God be God?

Will I let God's word determine how I live and how I worship and how I work as well? And we'll see how Adam responds.

[26:48] But just to close us out, having seen these principles for our work, let's think about Jesus. We need to think about the work of Jesus, because Jesus is the work of God to restore what we've ruined.

We haven't gotten there yet. We haven't got to Genesis 3, but we know that we will. Ever since Adam stretched out for that forbidden fruit, ever since Adam decided he was going to do what God said he should not do, our relationships have been spoiled.

And that includes our relationship to work. It's the nature of sin within us that means sometimes we turn work into our God.

Sometimes that's why we regard it as a gross thing. It's the reality of sin and the consequences of sin that mean we are frustrated in our work.

Sometimes we struggle because we can't find work, or we don't find work that fits with our gifts. But it's also why we sometimes try and falsely find our identity in our work.

[28:08] There are thorns and thistles everywhere. God designed work for our good and gave us good principles that we have seen. But what's God's response when things go wrong?

God responds by sending a worker. He sends his own son, the Lord Jesus. And the work of Jesus is the work of securing our forgiveness and bringing us salvation.

The work of Jesus is to restore a right relationship with God again, to begin restoring the image of God in us, which we in our sin have defaced and devalued.

Now, how does Jesus work when he comes into the world? Jesus is the only person who could truly say to his father, to do your will, I take delight.

We hear it and we see it in the gospels. Jesus always trusted his father. Jesus always obeyed his father's will for his life. Jesus sought to bring glory to God in all of his work.

[29:19] That work, that mission of bringing in the kingdom of God, of demonstrating and spreading the glory of God, of restoring sinners back to life with God. Jesus did it well.

He worked hard. He accomplished his task. And the climax of his work finds Jesus in another garden, this time not the Garden of Eden, a garden of pure perfection and delight, but the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus anticipates drinking the cup of God's anger, where he anticipates what it will feel like to have the crushing weight of our sin placed upon him as he became the sin bearer.

And yet Jesus prayed, as he committed wholeheartedly to the work of the cross.

So that we could read in Hebrews, Jesus who for the joy set before him, endured the cross. That was the joy of returning to his father, but it was also the joy of mission complete.

Jesus has joy that the work of salvation is done so that you and I, we can rest to enjoy God's saving grace, and we are set free to work for God's glory.

[30:42] We are restored by faith in Jesus to the dignity of a relationship with God so that we go with God into our work. Now we know that whatever we do, our work matters to God because we matter to God.

Now our work takes on a whole new purpose as we work for the Christ who worked for us. Let's pray together.

Let's pray together.