

Making Good Work

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. My name is Steve. I'm Senior Pastor here at St. Paul's, and it's my delight this morning to work, to bring this message of work to you. For those of you who are new here today, this is the third of our series in work, and it's a delight to be able to stand here and do it, and yet to get to this point has been a source of great frustration as well. So let's pray that'll come into clarity as we go through. Father God, we thank you for the security, the significance, the meaning, the hope that we have because of what you have done for us in the Lord Jesus and who we are, that we are your beloved called children. Father, we pray that that reality would shape all of our lives, that our vocation being called by you to put our trust in you would impact the vocation, the places that you put us day by day in this world to work for you. Use your word today to shape us and to give us hope and to put our primary hope in you and not in anything else that you've called us to, and we ask it for your sake. Amen.

Studs Terkel was an American author and historian and actor and broadcaster. He received the Pulitzer Prize in 1985 for his book, *The Good War*. He also wrote a book on work, and in the introduction to that book, he wrote, work is about violence to the spirit and the body. It's about ulcers and accidents.

It's about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog. Above all, it's about daily humiliation. To survive the day is a triumph, enough for those walking amongst the great many of us.

Well, that's a bit pessimistic. He expresses something of the incredible amount of frustration and pessimism there is about our working life. As I said last week, it doesn't matter what your frontline is, which is what in this series we're calling our vocation, our work, the place that God has put us. It doesn't matter if your frontline is in your home or in the classroom, it's on the factory floor, it's in a national park, it's in an office cubicle. Work can be a source of purpose and dignity and also a source of enormous frustration.

Dealing with difficult customers and a demanding boss or inclement weather or a family's mountain of laundry or a two-year-old or an elderly parent lingering unemployment, over-employment, underemployment. It can rob your day of joy. Every day of joy. Of course, that's the flip side of the message that I preached two weeks ago about the dignity of work where we see right from the very start of the Bible, God is a God of work. We too, created in his image, were created to work.

[3 : 20] It's astounding to, against the pessimism that we have and the frustration, it's astounding to realize that in the Bible, that work is in fact part of God's blessing and not part of the curse.

Each one of us has been assigned our vocation by God to work out his purpose in the world. We were created to work, that is to exercise dominion or, if you like, rulership over God's creation under him. Our experience, therefore, of work is both one of dignity and purpose, as well as difficulty and frustration and meaninglessness. That is, we flip and we flop between idealism and pessimism in our daily experience. The difficulty of work has its origin in Genesis 3, that passage that Jimmy read out to us there, where Adam and Eve decide to reject the authority of God over their lives. In God's address to Adam, in his response to his part, Adam's part of the rebellion, God says this about work. To Adam, he says, because you listened to your wife and you ate from the tree about which I commanded you, must not eat of it. 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. So there's the positive and the negative. It's toil, it's hard work, it's thorns, it's thistles, but you will eat of the fruit. 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 be returned. And that was my experience cutting the grass yesterday. It was great to cut it, it was great, it looked good afterwards, but man, it was hard and sweaty work and I just saw weeds everywhere.

I sat back in the day and said, that looks good, but it was hard work. The word curse here is used to describe a new reality. It's the massive and devastating effect on work. The curse means that the very nature and the context of human work has now changed because of sin. Work is now toilsome, it's difficult. Thorns and thistles will bring sweat of exertion to the forehead. The whole landscape of human existence has now been altered. There is an intense groaning and a weariness and a burden upon human existence. Evil and sin and death enter the world and they have a ravaging effect on creation. We are broken people living now in a broken world. And there is a number of ways that our work is impacted because of sin. The first, our work becomes fruitless. That is, we will be able to have a vision for far more of our work than we will ever be able to accomplish.

Both because of a lack of ability and because of resistance to the environment around us. The experience of work will include pain and conflict and envy and fatigue. And not all our goals will be met. In fact, a whole heap of them will be unmet. For example, you may have an inspiration to do a certain kind of work and perform a certain level of skill and quality, but you may never get the opportunity to do what you want. You may desire to be the number one tennis player in the world.

And that will always be frustrated while there's a guy named Roger Federer and Nadal and, you know, the other guy, the number one guy.

[7 : 30] I could see him, but I can't. Darkovich, that's him. The other guy who I can't remember and pronounce. While ever they're there, there will be a frustration for your plan to be number one tennis player in the world.

Your conflicts with others in the work environment will sap your confidence and undermine your productivity. You may hope to make a real contribution to your organization or to work with distinction, to be regarded as an expert in your field.

You may aspire to change the world, to make a major improvement in human society, to have a lasting impact on culture. And most people achieve none of that, if not very few of those goals in their lifetime.

And even those who do will sense that their true aspirations are thwarted as often as they are reached. The second impact of sin on our work is that it will become pointless.

There's a haunting sense that our work really doesn't have much significance at all. You see that expressed in Ecclesiastes 2, verses 17 to 18, where the writer says, So I hated life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.

[9 : 01] All of it is meaningless. It's a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things that I had toiled for under the sun because I must leave them to one who comes after me.

So the writer there is deeply disillusioned with his work. And as a consequence, disillusioned with his life.

What's the point of all this work and this toil, when in the end, I just hand it over to someone else? Someone else gets the fruit of my labour.

I work hard, build it all up. And my son buys the Ferrari. And all this causes many to have a very negative view of work.

How do we get satisfaction in the light of all that's against us? Well, the same writer says in chapter 3, the next chapter in Ecclesiastes, verse 13, To find satisfaction in all their toil, this is the gift of God.

[10 : 22] It's the gift of God. The writer concedes that satisfaction in work in a sin-ravaged world is always and only the miraculous gift of God.

And yet, strangely enough, this same writer says that we have a responsibility, in fact, to pursue the gift through a particular kind of balance.

He says this in chapter 4, verses 5 and 6 of Ecclesiastes, The fool folds his hands and he ruins himself. Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

What he's saying there is that tranquility, rest, without toil, won't bring satisfaction.

That is, to win the lotto and to not do anything with the rest of your life will not bring satisfaction. He says, neither will working really hard without any form of tranquility or rest.

[11 : 36] He says, there needs to be both toil with tranquility. That will result in purpose and satisfaction and meaning.

And how you get that balance in life is one of the main themes of the Bible. The New Testament reveals that the ultimate source of the tranquility that we seek is, in fact, Jesus Christ.

Who, because he toiled for us on the cross, can offer us the true rest and tranquility that our souls are longing for. Jesus said, Matthew chapter 11, Come to me, all who are weary and burdened.

We've just sang this. Just sung it. Come to me, all who are weary and burdened. I'll give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. I have found it so... Oh, oh, oh. See, that passage is the deepest picture of what can happen to our work when we meet Jesus.

[12 : 56] When Jesus calls all people to himself, he says that he knows that we are weary, that we are burdened, and that we need rest. But Jesus' cure for our weariness in Matthew chapter 11, verse 30, is a burden.

And a yoke. And a yoke. And a yoke. In verse 29. It's not to escape all burdens and yokes.

It's not to have complete freedom and do whatever I want. It is, in fact, a burden and a yoke. The yoke or the harness which was put on a bullock of burden, the beast which plowed a field, was a symbol of slavery and of grinding toil.

How could this possibly be a solution to the problem of deep weariness? Jesus says that it is his yoke and his burden that is the only one that is light.

It's the only easy one. Why? For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, verse 29.

[14 : 21] Matthew 11. It's only light because of the one who gives it to us.

He is the only boss who will never drive you into the ground. He is the only audience that does not need your best performance in order to be satisfied with you.

Why is this? Because his work for you is finished. That's why.

His work for you is finished. In fact, the very definition of a Christian is someone who doesn't just admire Jesus, doesn't just respect Jesus, doesn't just desire to emulate Jesus, doesn't just obey Jesus, but someone who rests in the finished work of Jesus.

That's a Christian. Do you remember that God was able to rest in Genesis chapter 2, verses 1 to 3? I said this last week, maybe the week before.

[15 : 40] He was able to rest because his work was finished. His creative work was done. And a Christian is able to find rest from toil only because God's redemptive work is likewise finished in Jesus.

When our attempt to find satisfaction and significance and meaning has been satisfied by the Lord Jesus, all that's left for us to do is to serve the work that we're being given by the Father.

You see, far too many people in our world, and maybe it's even you sitting in here today, you're not just doing the work that draws the salary.

You're not just doing the work that raises the child. You're not just doing the work that cares for a family member. But you're also doing the work under that work, which is attempting to chase away the feeling of insignificance and purposelessness and meaninglessness.

Through that work, you're trying to solve that job down there. That's why that is our identities attached to it.

[17 : 01] That's why we introduce ourselves with, I'm Stephen, I'm a minister. I'm Bill, and I'm a this. I'm Jackie, and I'm a that. That is, what we're doing, we're doing the work under the work. You're attempting to work for something more, for something more that is more meaningful and deeper than just the work that you're doing.

You're working for hope and security and identity and significance through the vocation. But it will never give you the rest that you need.

In Jesus, we find rest for our souls, and without it, all other work will be unsatisfying. Never be able to relax, even when you're supposed to be resting.

You won't ever be able to walk away from your work, even for an evening. Won't be able to enjoy the satisfaction that God intended when he called us to the work that he prayed for us to do.

[18 : 17] Because we're hoping that that work will give us what only God himself can give us. A classic example of how this might look like in reality, in practice, is in the film Chariots of Fire, which is a real-life story.

One man, there's about two main characters. One of those characters ran in the Olympics, and I quote, to justify my existence.

While the other man had such a deep rest in Christ, that he could miss, likely miss, a gold medal by not running on a Sunday, because his commitment to Jesus meant that he had rest already.

He didn't need the gold medal to find that. The first man had to get a medal because he was running to find satisfaction. The second man, devoted Christian, Eric Liddell, did not care in the same way whether he won the Olympic medal or not, because he had rest.

He had his satisfaction. He had his meaning. He had his purpose. He told his sister that God had made him fast. And when I run, when I run, I feel his pleasure.

[19 : 49] It doesn't matter whether I win or not. He ran for the joy of running itself, and to delight the one who gave him the gift of running.

The gold medal was inconsequential to him. You see, when we have rest, we have significance, and we have acceptance and security, in Jesus, we are set free to work well.

Jesus' finished work of salvation is the work that catapults us to work well with dignity, even when it is hard, as it was for those who were receiving Colossians 3, verses 22 onwards.

This is revolutionary teaching in Colossians 3, to slaves. The dehumanizing nature of slavery was vast in the Roman Empire.

Ancient historians estimate that there were some 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. Half of the population. Half of the population.

[21 : 08] Work was considered below the dignity of slave owners, and it was below the dignity of the Roman culture.

Practically everything was done by slaves, including doctoring and teaching. Now, while there were some good relationships between slaves and slave owners, on the most part, that was not the case.

Ancient tradition, dating back to Aristotle, classified slaves as things. They were regarded as tools.

Not as people. Tools. The Romans classified farm implements into three categories. The articulate, the inarticulate, and the mute.

And the articulate were the slaves. They were regarded as tools, farm implements. A later Roman writer recommended quite a grim action when a Roman landowner bought a new farm.

[22 : 26] His suggestion was that you tossed out the old slaves to die because they were broken tools. And so most did.

So the situation of slaves in general was not good. It was terrible. Hardship. Hopelessness. Hopelessness blanketed the lives of millions, tens of millions in the ancient world.

And Christianity's preaching of the British work of the Lord Jesus Christ with his explicit doctrine of the equality of all people raised the hope.

and also created an awful lot of society tension. Particularly between slaves and masters.

The advice of the Apostle Paul here was revolutionary. Because in time, it actually brought down slavery as an institution.

[23 : 30] But it was immediately revolutionary that it actually brought fullness to the Christian life of whether you were a slave or a master.

And if you go a couple of verses before, parents, wives, children. It's all in the same context. Look at the revolutionary teaching. Firstly, because of the finished work of Jesus that gives us satisfaction, security, fulfillment, rest, slaves and us are set free from people pleasing.

Verse 22, slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything and do it not only when their eye is on you to win their favor. Now, of course, Paul's not encouraging submission to immoral and hurtful commands.

And yet everything, the word everything, is so encompassing here. Slaves were very often asked to do the most debased and demeaning things.

And so this is a tough command, especially when it's linked with the very next phrase which says, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor.

[24 : 44] It literally means eye service. Eye service. It's working that is only done when the boss is looking. We all know what that's like.

You know, you're at the gym and you're, you know, you're in a gym class and you're hiding down the back and the instructor comes near you, you're doing push-ups and all of a sudden you can do 10 of the best.

And when they, when they got, you know, the feeling, you know, when you think you're getting scored in some way, you can produce the best. Eye service results in half-heartedness.

I'm trying to please someone out here. The room is swept but the dirt is brushed under the carpet. Work breaks get extended until the boss returns. The finished work of Jesus motivates us, enables us to work with sincerity of heart with all of your heart and this high call here makes no distinction between the pleasant and the unpleasant tasks, the dull or the challenging, the menial or the interesting.

It simply states that everything must be done energetically from the heart whether the boss is present or not because the boss is always present. do it as working for the Lord.

[26 : 17] And if that high call stood by itself it would be supremely, supremely debilitating and impossible. But it's accompanied by an enabling rationale so secondly because of the finished work of Jesus that gives us satisfaction and security and fulfillment and rest slaves and us are set free to work wholeheartedly because the work that we're doing is in fact spiritual work.

Verse 22 work sincerity of heart reverence for the Lord whatever you do work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord not for men. Some of us shuffle meaningless mounds of paper around some dig holes and fill them back in again.

some can see nothing noble in the task that you're performing they are nevertheless serving God as you work.

This truth transformed the work of the Christian slave in the ancient world. His nothing tasks were actually noble in a culture that disregarded them.

They were actually noble when done for Christ because he has been set free by Christ. It's interesting that Christian slaves invariably brought higher price at slave auctions.

[27 : 43] This radical preaching of Paul so transformed Christian slaves that the higher price was paid for them. The pagan slave served his master because he was bound by fear.

He never knew when he was going to be executed because he displeased his master. The Christian slave served his master better than anyone because he was bound by the love and the acceptance and the freedom of Christ.

Working hard at our tasks from the heart brings glory to God. Christians ought to be the best in attitude, the best in dependability, the best in integrity.

Thirdly, because of the finished work of Christ that gives us satisfaction and security and fulfillment and rest, slaves and us are now set free to work with the hope that our work will be recognized and rewarded in the end.

It's not just about handing it over to the next person. Work with all your heart because, verse 24, you know that you receive an inheritance from the Lord as reward.

[29 : 02] It is the Lord Christ you are serving. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. To the first century slave, that bit of news was fantastic because under Roman law, it was illegal for a slave to inherit anything.

they were a tool that was disposed of. All their labor just came to an end and that's it. And yet here, they learn that they would receive a reward.

God rewards faithful workers forever. This ought to be an encouragement to us as it is to them. Whatever your lot in life is, God pays you so well.

He pays you so well that when we get to heaven, we will wish that we just worked more and better for him. Now, notice that this instruction to these Colossian slaves sits within a section of hard and controversial instruction to Christians living to wives and husbands and children and fathers and masters and slaves.

In other words, in one way or another, all of this teaching will jar. But the empowerment and the fuel and the energy and the motivation to live this life came from the rest of chapter 3.

[30 : 34] This is coming at the end of what has happened before in chapter 3. Verse 1 of chapter 3, since you've been raised with Christ. Verse 3 of chapter 3, your life is now hidden with Christ.

Verse 4, when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you will also appear with him in glory. Verse 12, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved. And then verse 16, just before this section, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

In other words, and more specifically, for that verse, let the gospel, let what Christ has achieved for you, his finished work on the cross for you, dwell in your heart.

May your vision be the gospel. May it be your focus and your joy and your hope and your treasure. When your heart comes to know hope in Christ and the future that he has guaranteed for you because of his furnished work, when you are carrying his easy yoke, you will finally have the power to work with a free heart.

You can accept gladly whatever level of success and accomplishment that God gives you in your vocation because he's the one who has called you to it.

[32 : 00] You can work with a passion and rest, knowing that ultimately the deepest desires of your heart will only be fulfilled.

when you reach your true home, your inheritance, the new heavens and the new earth. And so, brothers and sisters, whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Amen.