

Hard Work

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[0 : 00] I don't know if you've seen that show before. It has become widely popular. And his message is not dissimilar to the message that I had last week. There is dignity in all work. And he's become famous for that.

Mike Rowe, he's the host of the show. And famous for getting his hands dirty, doing the work that no one else wants to do. A long list of jobs he's done. Rattlesnake catcher.

Roadkill collector. Shark attack suit tester. Maggot farmer. Spider venom collector. Septic tank cleaner.

And the list goes on and on and on. The major thrust of the show is that work is good. In fact, all work is good. In fact, he'd say that dirty work is better than an office job.

I think that's kind of what he says. But he says that he has witnessed people doing all kinds of work. Tough work. Odd work. Dirty work.

[0 : 54] Hard work. And they enjoy it. It's not dissimilar to the message that I had last week. That is that according to the Bible, there is dignity in all work.

Mike has become a voice in the U.S. calling people basically to get stuck in and work for the good of the country. Mind you, if you've watched the show, it's not hard to notice that while there might be some positives in those dirty jobs, like he's getting paid a packet to give it a go at it, there is a whole lot of negatives in some of the work as well.

So there might be some moments where people are whistled. But not all the time. One of the jobs, for instance, that he listed as a potential career choice was roadkill collector.

And he had a go himself. But the requirements were fairly basic. He said that you needed to be able to brave oncoming traffic. That was one thing. And the other one is that you needed a fairly strong stomach.

But the positive was that you get to work outdoors. I mean, that's it. That has seemed to be the positive for that job. And you kind of wonder how long that positive would last for every day.

[2 : 17] Well, at least I'm working outdoors as the cars are zooming by and as you scrape off the road varying decays of flesh. It just wouldn't be that great, I don't think.

So last week I spoke about the dignity of all work. It didn't matter what you did. It's dignity associated with it. And I said that hopefully by the end of this series you'll walk out of here and you'll go, thank God it's Monday, rather than, whew, thank God it's Friday.

Actually look forward to the working week. And I'm pretty sure that most of you didn't probably do that last Monday. And there's probably a reason for that. And we're going to look at that today.

It doesn't matter if your workplace is in the home, it's in the classroom, it's on the factory floor, it's in a national park, it's in an office cubicle. Work is often a great source of frustration in our lives.

Dealing with difficult customers, demanding bosses, inclement weather, a family's mountain of dirty laundry, a lingering unemployment, underemployment, overemployment can all be a huge pain.

- [3 : 28] It can actually feel like a curse. Work is often a mix of the good, the bad and the ugly for us. I like gardening. More specifically than liking gardening, I really like using noisy gardening tools.
- I love my lawnmower and my leaf blower. I'm one of those really annoying people. Whipper snipper. If you can get a power tool associated with it, I love doing it. And so I love gardening, but I find it so frustrating.
- I love actually cutting my grass, but I am so frustrated that the grass appears to be never as healthy as the weeds.
- I've got a citrus tree in my backyard that used to have fruit on it until I started to look after it. I started to fertilize it and prune it and keep the kids away from it.
- And it's never grown fruit since. And so there is a Bible passage that I've quoted to the tree in Luke chapter 11. One more season, one more season, no fruit, and I'm going to cut you down and throw you into the furnace.
- [4 : 37] And so far it hasn't worked. I've used it as a threat, but it hasn't worked. You see, I love gardening, but it's an enormous source of frustration for me.
- Even on my day off, I actually like doing it. Last Friday, two days ago, was a classic example. On Thursday, we had some tree trimmer dudes come in. There's a technical name for them.
- Can't remember what they're called. They come in, cut the leaves down, the branches which are going to die and hang it over the neighbor's place and whatever else. And then they throw them through this huge grinding machine.
- We all love to have one of those, I reckon. Just blast it out and out it comes in the back of the truck. And then they said to me, do you want the mulch? And I said, that's fantastic. I'll have the mulch. And they dumped it in the car park in the corner.
- And I figured I'll shovel it on Friday, day off. What a great thing to do. I can get my wheelbarrow and my shovel and just move around the garden. What a great afternoon.
- [5 : 34] That would be fantastic. Except I woke up on Friday feeling unwell, not wanting to do much at all. And so I felt trapped all of a sudden. This job that I was looking forward to all of a sudden became a source of frustration for me.
- Because I knew that yesterday I was going to spend my time writing this sermon. And so I wasn't going to do it then. And I knew that on Sunday we're going to need the car park. And a big pile of mulch in the middle of the car park is not going to be, well, the car park people aren't going to be happy with me with that one.
- And so all of a sudden this thing that I was looking forward to became a chore for me. Became a source of frustration. But then with a bit of energy I got stuck into it.
- I was making good progress until my three-year-old comes out with her gumboots on and her beach spade and says, Daddy, I've come to help you. Now that's cute for most of you.
- For me it wasn't cute. I mean it was cute but it was frustratingly cute. Because help me is not really help. You know, I've got a three-year-old now to look after.
- [6 : 43] And her little shovels going into it slowed everything down to slow motion. She was delightful. The job was done. But it became more and more frustrating for me when every time I went to dump a barrel load I had to pick a flower.
- One for Izzy. One for mummy. One for daddy. One for Dave.
- One for Monty. It's like, oh my goodness, this job has now taken me two hours when it should have just taken me an hour. Every load was three-year-old steps.

Backwards and forwards. Backwards and forwards. And so something that I was looking forward to and in fact was even enjoying became a source of frustration for me. Last week we saw the delightful picture of work as God originally intended it in Genesis 1 and 2.

Adam and Eve are working in a pristine garden context with a joyful and intimate relationship with their creator. And in that context, work is exhilarating. It's an exhilarating pleasure.

[7 : 50] But we'll see today that work now exists in a world still sustained by God and yet disordered by sin. And it is only as we have some understanding of how sin distorts work that we can ever hope to counteract its effects and salvage some of the satisfaction that God originally intended for the work that we do.

So when God put Adam in the garden, in the garden paradise to work it, he gave him a specific instruction. Chapter 2. So you need your Bibles open. Genesis 3. But let's just flick into 2.

Verse 15. Now I suspect that there was nothing special about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil per se.

That is, there was likely nothing magical or unusual about the tree or the fruit itself. In the end, what we know is that the tree was a test.

God was saying, I want you to obey me simply because of who I am, simply because you love me and trust me more than anything else. And that command in Genesis 2 contains the essence of all biblical commands.

[9 : 23] It was an opportunity for Adam to voluntarily make his relationship with God the primary value in his life. The most important thing. And to obey God's words simply because he's God.

And when you arrive in Genesis chapter 3, we discover the tragic response to that call there in Genesis 2.

Lured by Satan's lies, Adam and Eve commit an unthinkable act of folly. They ate from the tree and they rebel against God's command. They were lured by Satan's half-truth.

See it there in chapter 3 verse 5. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. You see, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command, they became like God, as the serpent said that they would.

That is, they put themselves in God's place. They took upon themselves the right to decide how they would live their lives and what would be right and what would be wrong for them.

[10 : 38] And so the serpent held out the bait for them. You know, you eat of this fruit and you become like God. And they're like, wow, God's impressive. So that's a good offer.

But he forgot to mention the consequences. To become like God when you're not God is catastrophic.

Everything unravels when we choose to be our own source of authority. We were designed to know, to serve and to love God supremely. And when we are faithful to that design, we flourish.

But when we instead choose to live for ourselves, everything, right from the beginning, starts to turn upside down. The human race began to live against the grain of the universe.

Against the grain of our own making and purpose. And as Paul says there in Romans 8, which was read out to us, the entire world is now in bondage to decay.

[11 : 39] We are enslaved. We are in chains to decay. Nothing now works as it should. The entire world feels as if it is alienated from its creator.

And sin leads to the disintegration of every area of life. Spiritual, physical, social, cultural, psychological, temporal, eternal. The whole lot. And so what we see here is that they rebel against God.

God comes to Adam and Eve and asks them what happened in chapter 3, verses 10 to 13. And Adam completely avoids the real truth.

All he wants to do here is complain about his inner unhappiness and his shame. He says in verse 10, I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked and so I hid.

What a man. And so he dodges the issue when God's second question is pointed directly at Adam so that he's got no opportunity to avoid it.

[12 : 49] And he has to fess up. Verse 11, And so here's Adam, completely snookered.

And so he has to confess that yes, I've eaten from the tree. But what he does is he deflects the responsibility away from himself to Eve.

In verse 12, The woman you put here with me, she gave me some fruit of the tree and I ate it. It's like, don't look at me, look at her. He's just like, what a man.

And in turn, Eve deflects to the serpent. In verse 13, The serpent deceived me and I ate. But their hostility and their anger are not only towards each other and towards the creatures, but towards God himself.

Adam blames God for his problems. In verse 12, he basically says, God, you know, have a look at yourself in this scenario. The woman you put here with me, she gave me and I ate.

[13 : 59] I mean, you gave it to me after all, God. It's your fault, really, in the end. One commentator on these verses writes, Now, I just want to linger at that point for a bit.

Because I think that is so profound. So, so important to get our mind around. So important that I'm going to take us on a side track, a detour here for a little bit. It is so profoundly true, that last statement.

From the moment of the fall, humankind has suffered from moral schizophrenia, neither able to deny sinfulness, nor to acknowledge it for what it is.

You see, it's so right. We cannot deny our sinfulness. If I said to you, stand up where you are if you are perfect, no one's going to stand, unless they're going to want to have a bit of a joke and make us all laugh.

No one's going to stand. Again, we all acknowledge the fact that I'm a failure. We all acknowledge the fact that I'm not perfect. Not just God's standards.

[15 : 48] I don't even live up to my own standards. You can't deny it. Anyone who stands up and says, I'm perfect, we will either deliberately say, liar, or we will be behind their back saying, what an idiot.

We all know it's there. We all know the sin's there. We all know the failure's there. We acknowledge we're not perfect. But that does not mean that we actually own our sin. This is, I believe, one of the most significant roadblocks to our grasp of the gospel of grace.

I mean, to really, really grasp it and to relish it and to love it and to plead for mercy, it's because we don't truly own our sin.

We have a vague, blasé, non-specific, general view of sin. Like, I'm flawed.

We all know that. Unless we see the depths of our own sin against God as greater than the depths of someone else's sin against me, there will never be a true appreciation of God's grace or deep relational reconciliation with others.

[17 : 07] The Genesis 3 blame game that happens here is how we operate across our relational landscape, including our work.

It is so much easier to blame colleagues, the company, the government, whatever it is, for my failure. It's easier in the home for me to blame Nat or the kids or the cats.

To work against the blame game, I need to take ownership. If I trip over something, instead of blaming one of my children for putting it there, I at least have to ask myself, first and foremost, is why was I not looking where I was walking?

But instead, the very first thing, the default, automatic, first response is to who's responsible for this. We just do it automatically.

We've had people trip over here at church. And as the crowd gathers to help the person, no one says, why weren't you looking? Everyone says, who's responsible for this? Who put that concrete there?

[18 : 25] Who put that thing there? It's just automatic. It just happens. We just automatically look for someone to blame. And what is possibly worse?

When I realize that that's what I've done, I distort repentance by saying a qualified sorry. I'm really sorry for upsetting you, but you really shouldn't have left that doll there.

That's not sorry. That's a more spiritual way of shifting the blame game. That's all that is. That's not genuine repentance. That's not me actually owning my sin.

Why do we do it? It's because it's what happens here. In the Garden of Eden, it deflects the attention of my own failure, my own faults, my own sin.

We are so skilled at seeing someone else's failings. We are so skilled at seeing someone else's failings than we are at seeing or acknowledging our own. We are so skilled at seeing the failings of other people.

[19 : 37] How often, my friends, do we truly grieve the depth of our sin rather than pointing out the depth of someone else's sin? And if you're sitting there right now thinking about someone else who I know who does that all the time, that's my point.

Forget about them. Think about them. Think about them. Think about them. Think about you. Think about them.

I do it too. And God sees right through it. God doesn't go to Adam, oh Adam, it's not your fault, okay, so I need to be talking to Eve.

He doesn't give a rip. He doesn't give a rip who picked the fruit and ate it first. He held everyone accountable for what they had done. So you think of a scenario where you need deep reconciliation.

Stop looking at the other person and start looking at your own heart, looking at your own heart to God. To God. Okay, that's the diversion.

[21 : 09] In God's address to Adam in response to his part in the rebellion, God says this about work. Chapter 3, verse 17.

To Adam, he said, The word curse. He said,

Because of sin, That because of sin, our work becomes fruitless. What I mean by that is that we will be able to envisage far more for our work than we will ever be able to accomplish.

Both because of lack of ability and because of resistance in the environment around us.

The experience of work will involve pain and conflict and envy and fatigue and not all our goals will be met. And you become very aware of that when you have children.

[23 : 34] Before, I'm not picking on anyone specifically here. I'll just move it over here a little bit. You become painfully aware of it.

You see, before kids, before kids, you kind of look at other people with kids and you go, Oh, my kids will never do that. Until you have kids and you realize that they do do that.

And you have this ideal about how you're going to raise your kids and you're never going to give them chocolate before. They'll never discover a Tim Tam before they're 16 sort of stuff.

You know, you're going to keep them a perfect diet and all that sort of stuff. And then someone feeds your kid when they're five months old a piece of chocolate and you go, It's all ruined. They're now violated. And you just think, the things that you want to achieve, the things you want to envisage in terms of what you're going to do with your children, it just never comes about the way you want it to be.

And it's like that with the work that you do. You may have aspirations to do a certain kind of work and perform at a certain level of skill and quality, but you may never be able to get the opportunity to do the work that you want.

[24 : 44] And if you do, to not be able to do it as well as it needs to be done, never fully achieve it. Your conflicts with others in the work environment will sap your confidence.

It will undermine your productivity. You may hope to make a real contribution to your organization or to work with the distinction as an expert in your field. You may aspire to change the world in a multitude of ways, make a major improvement in human society, or have a lasting impact on the culture.

And most people will achieve very few of those goals in their lifetime. And even if they are able to, that is, those who seem to live a charmed work life, they themselves will have a deep sense of dissatisfaction with their work.

Mozart was a classic. Mozart, everyone looked at Mozart and go, the guy is brilliant. You speak to Mozart though, rubbish, rubbish, rubbish, what he produced.

That's his perception. He never achieved it. Everyone else thought he did, but he didn't think he did. I'll be honest with you, I feel so blessed to be doing what I do.

[26 : 10] I'm doing what I love to do. I really do. I've been blessed to see fruitfulness in ministry that I never expected to see. I'll be honest with you, I didn't expect us to be where we are as a church right now after three years of Vision 2020.

I expected it to take six years to be where we are now. And so I love what I'm doing. I feel blessed in what I do. I see fruit for what I do.

And yet I also experience plenty of thorns and thistles. No names specifically that I mentioned there.

There's plenty of thorns and thistles. You know, things which encroach upon my life in such a way that it feels like my work is a burden. One season was when we found that we had issues with pregnancy with our second child.

And all but the most basic parts of my work were put on hold. Productivity just went straight through the floor for me. There have been issues with staff.

[27 : 16] There have been issues with parishioners. There have been all those things and a number of other things which threaten the momentum of our corporate vision together and our ministry together. I am grateful to God for the glimpses that he has given me of what could be.

But I am daily aware of the encroachment of thorns and thistles in the patch of the world that has been trusted to me for this season. Very aware of it.

It is important for us to understand and hold in tension what the Bible says about creation and about the fall. About God's dignity and plan for work and also about the problems of work in a broken, sinful world.

We need to be realistic and to be careful of a naive and utopian view of work. Because of the nature of God's creation, we need work for our happiness.

It's a good thing. And because of God's intention for our work, we have glimpses of what could be accomplished. But because of sin, our work is also profoundly frustrating.

[28 : 28] Never as fruitful as we want. We never seem to be able to achieve what we want. And it's often a complete failure. That's why so many people inhabit the extremes of idealism and cynicism.

Or even, depending on what day of the week it is, ricochet between either. Idealism says that through my work I'm going to change things, make a difference, accomplish something new, bring justice to the world.

It's the idealism that says you can be whatever you want to be. You've just got to put your heart and your mind to it and you can do whatever you like. Frankly, I will never be an opera singer.

I don't care how much I put my heart and my mind to it. I will never be an opera singer. That is just not my gifting. Cynicism, on the other hand, says nothing really changes.

Don't get your hopes up. Do what it takes to make a living. Don't let yourself care too much. Get out of it whatever you can. Don't forget to take all of your annual leave and use up all your six days and everything else that you can in between.

[29 : 35] Christians have, through their hope in God's story of redemption for the world that he created, a deep contentment that enables them to work with all their being and never be ultimately discouraged by the frustrating reality of the work.

That's the first thing. Our work becomes fruitless. The second thing, impact of sin on our work, is that it becomes pointless. That is, that there's this haunting sense that our work really doesn't have much significance at all.

You see that expressed in Ecclesiastes chapter 2, where the writer says in verse 17, So clearly the writer here is deeply disillusioned with his life and work because in the end it just gets handed over to someone else.

What's the point of that, he says? So you imagine you're the CEO of a company. You retire. New CEO comes in. And the new CEO comes in and says, actually, we're not going to go in that direction.

We're going to go in this direction. We're going to sell off those companies that the previous CEO bought. And we're going to head in this completely different direction in here. And the old guy who's just retired goes, you've just unraveled everything that I did in my work in life.

[31 : 08] What was the point? That's the point here of Ecclesiastes. Or you've amassed a real estate portfolio. You've got some shares in the bank.

You're sitting pretty comfy on the beach somewhere, sipping wine. You're dying. You leave all your money and your whole estate to your kids or a bunch of losers. What's the point?

What's the point? So how do we get satisfaction in light of all that we have against us?

How do we gain a sense of satisfaction and purpose? When in the end, it could all come to nothing. Chapter 3, verse 13. The writer says that it is possible to have that sense of satisfaction, but it is a gift from God.

He says, to find satisfaction in all their toil, this is the gift of God. The writer concedes that satisfaction in work in a sin ravaged world is always a miraculous gift of God.

[32 : 12] And yet, he says, we actually have a responsibility to pursue this gift of God through a particular balance in life.

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

What he's saying there is, tranquility without the toil will not bring you satisfaction. That is, let's jettison work and spend all our time in pleasure.

He says, that's not going to bring the satisfaction. He says, but neither will toil without tranquility. Haven't got time for holidays. I'm going to work, work, work, and I'm going to finally achieve all those goals that I can envisage down there.

I'm just going to spend all of my time and I'm just going to focus on it. 11 days a week, going to pursue it, and then eventually I'll get there. And he says, you won't get it.

[33 : 22] He says, there needs to be both toil and tranquility. And how we get that balanced life is one of the main things of the Bible. First, it means recognizing and renouncing our tendency to make idols out of our work.

That's the first thing, and Chris is going to spend more time on that next week. Secondly, it means putting relationships in their proper place, even though it will probably mean making less money or less advancement in my work.

But most of all, it will mean pursuing something that is beyond the scope of Ecclesiastes to make clear for us. The New Testament reveals that the ultimate source of the tranquility that we seek is the Lord Jesus Christ, who because he has toiled for us on the cross, can offer us the true rest for our souls that we seek and need.

Jesus says in Matthew 11, verse 28 to 30, Amen.