

Sermons & Presentations

Title: Theology of Work

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I used to wonder how many people went off to work each day singing a la The Seven Dwarves. "Heigh-ho! Heigh-ho! It's off to work we go!" I was "today years old" earlier this week when I found out that the lyric is actually "Heigh-ho! Heigh-ho! It's home from work we go!" This puts a rather different slant on things. The song also describes some different attitudes toward work. "We dig dig dig dig dig dig in our mine the whole day through/To dig...is what we really like to do" "It ain't no trick to get rich quick/If you dig... with a shovel or a pick/In a mine where a million diamonds shine" "We dig up diamonds by the score/A thousand rubies, sometimes more/But we don't know what we dig them for..."

What is our theology of work? It's something that we can neglect, and what better weekend to look at it than Labour Day weekend – the time of year when, for many, our schedules go from vacation to vocation. We are given 168 hours each week, and many will devote 35-40 of these hours to work. For some, this may look more like 60 hours, or even 70. Multiple jobs. The gig economy. Quiet quitting. Paid vs. unpaid work. Volunteer work. These are all parts of the conversation around work. For followers of Christ, what makes up our conversation and practice around work? We're talking about a theology of work, and by theology, we simply mean the nature of God

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Sermons & Presentations

and work. What God is like when it comes to work and what this means in terms of our relationship with God, with people, with all of creation. Our life situation when it comes to work varies wildly. We may resonate with one of these descriptions:

- My work has special meaning because I have been called to do what I'm doing regardless of how much time it takes or how little money I earn; I was put on earth to do what I am doing.
- I am pursuing a lifelong career which I feel is important; I chose to do this kind of work throughout my life; I might change where I work, but I'm not likely to change the kind of work I do.
- I am paid to perform a service; I have been paid to do other things at other times, and I am willing to do other types of work in the future if the pay and security are better.
- I do not have paid employment at this time; I am uncertain about what sort of paid employment to seek if any, but I find (or don't find) plenty of unpaid work to do.
- I am retired from paid work but find unpaid work that is fulfilling.
- My work is mainly comprised of study.

Sermons & Presentations

I think this might cover us all, from the youngest among us who are starting out, wondering what God has in store for them, to our elders for whom physical limitations means that the most fulfilling work that they do is in prayer.

We look to Genesis, first of all, to see what God's word has to say to us about God, work, and ourselves. We find there that God works. Work is not all God does, of course. God rests, too (and it would be good to look at a theology of rest at some point in fuller detail!). "On the seventh day, God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So, God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation." ([Gen 2:2-3](#)) We are made in the image of God. God is the God of work, of creation. In God's case, creation out of nothing. Calling forth something that had not existed previously. Speaking light from darkness. Bringing life.

This is not the work we're called to. This is letting God be God. "Have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." "Take care of things," says God. Work was not the result of the Fall – of humanity going wrong – though it was made harder because of the Fall. "In toil, you shall eat of it," said God of the earth after things went wrong. "Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you." "By the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread." Things got

Sermons & Presentations

more difficult, but taking care of creation and being creative was always part of God's plan. We read "have dominion over" or "rule over," and we might tend to think that being given rule over something means do whatever we want. We're the ruler, after all. Look where that kind of thinking has brought us. Theology of rest and theology of creation care is all tied up in this theology of work. "Till and keep it" was God's command about the garden. "Keep" here is the same Hebrew word we hear in Aaron's blessing – "The Lord bless you and keep you." Keep it. Look after it. Remember that any dominion or rulership we are given is under the rulership of God. Let God be God and remember our place in the whole scheme of things. Remember that our Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all he has made. Someone has said that we have been made by God to "...manage God's world, and this stewardship is part of the human vocation in Christ. It calls for hard work, with God's honour and the good of others as its goal." I would add to this the good of all creation as its goal.

We're called to be creative. Not to create something out of nothing but to create something out of something. Pieces of wood make a house (or a guitar or piano or viola). Pieces of metal make a tool which makes... We come around the table of the Lord with bread and wine. Part of their significance is how they show humanity being creative. Creating bread from grain and wine (or juice) from grapes. When our work is done for the love of God and the love of humanity, and the love of creation, it might

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Sermons & Presentations

even have eternal importance. In John's vision of the new heavens and the new earth, he sees the new Jerusalem and writes of how the nations will walk by its light, and the people will bring into it the glory and honour of the nations. Imagine creative endeavours – whether it be a house or poem or a dress or a prayer having lasting, eternal significance.

No matter what our own work looks like, our primary vocation (our primary call) is to accept our God-given identity as beloved children of God through the grace of Christ Jesus and be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we come ever more to bear his loving, gracious, merciful, just, compassionate, image. Now you may be saying, "This is all very easy for you to say, Pastor David! You're getting to sit with this stuff at length every week and have this holy kind of job! It's hard out there in the world when you're dealing with companies and directors and managers and shareholders and customers, and it's everyone for themselves!"

I know it's hard. I've been out there too. If you're not out there anymore, pray for everyone who is. The call to be a professional Christian does not set me or anyone else who has followed that call over and above anyone else. God can use many types of work for the advancement of God's kingdom, and God is often working in ways that are unseen or even unknown to us – even in a world or society or business which

Sermons & Presentations

seems to actively oppose the ways of God, or set up false gods that act in direct opposition to God or claim the lordship of cash or the market or diversion or whatever lordships are being claimed.

It's hard. We need to be reminded of our identity. I talked about our primary vocation as accepting our identity as beloved children of God through the gift of Christ Jesus and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. My own given name is Hebrew for "Beloved," and I'm thankful to be constantly reminded of this truth. This brings us to the story of four Hebrews who were forced into work in a foreign land. Daniel. Hananiah. Mishael. Azariah. God is my judge. The Lord is gracious. Who is like God? (the implied answer, of course, being "Nobody!"). The Lord has helped. This is what their names mean. They are given new names.

Beloved – may we never forget our primary identity as beloved children of God. We can be tempted to find our primary identity in our work, and there is no doubt that work has a role in shaping who we are. The problem with our work being our primary identifier, of course, is, what happens when we no longer hold that identity. My own identity and worth in God's eyes is not that I'm a pastor but that I am God's beloved child.

Jerusalem has fallen. The treasures of the Temple -items used in worship of Yahweh have been carried off to Babylon and in the Babylonian treasury. Soon they'll be used

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Sermons & Presentations

as party dishes so that the king and his court can have a good laugh about Israel's so-called God.

Who is in control? The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into King Nebuchadnezzar's power, remember? This was not something done to God. God is the one who brings renewal from devastation, life from death. How will Daniel and his friends serve their King faithfully while serving this foreign king? They will remember their identity. They gave them new names. Belteshazzar. Shadrach.

Meshach. Abednego. Bel, protect his life. Command of Aku (a moon god). Who is like Aku? Servant of the god Nabu. They remember who they are. There are things they will not compromise. Royal rations would not be kosher. Daniel gets creative. Let us be vegetarians for 10 days and see how it goes with us. It goes well. God honours their faithfulness. God gives them knowledge and understanding. They become God's representatives in a setting that is largely hostile to God, but also one in which God is present and working.

What might this mean for us? It needn't look like anything grandiose or intimidating. It might be listening with compassion to a co-worker. It might be inviting others to a time of prayer at a moment of loss. I remember shortly before I left my work with the Government of Ontario, a co-worker died suddenly. He had had a heart attack one

Sermons & Presentations

weekend while on vacation. He was in his 30's. We heard the news on Monday morning. People were shaken. I asked our manager if we could have a time of prayer in the boardroom at lunch. I said, "This is what people who share my faith do in times like this." It was open to people of all faiths or no faith. We held hands in a circle. God made his presence known.

Daniel continued there (in the court) until the time of King Cyrus. In other words, he continued there until the time of deliverance. Whatever our situation, may we be found faithful to our faithful God. May the honour we give to God result in blessings all around us, no matter where we are. As we gather around the table and are reminded of our creative role in the Kingdom of God through bread and juice, may the new season be a time of renewal and recommitment to the work to which God calls us. May this be true for us all. Amen