

## Work As It Is

series: *Faith and Work*

Genesis 11:1-4

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We've been together this month, we've begun this brief series on *Faith and Work* looking at how does faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and living our lives as Christians—how does that connect with our daily work. Is there a connection or is it something that is siloed off: worship on Sunday, but then we get to work, with the rest of what we do, on Monday. How does the Lord want us to understand it?

Last week we looked together at “Work As It Ought to Be,” how the Lord originally designed work as a reflection of who he is and what he designed us to do. And to enjoy work as an expression and as a reflection of a God who did a great deal of work, but who also rested. And that work was meant to be an expression of what God has called us to do and that which we enjoy doing, but because of the fall, what we often feel is our vocation, what we feel a calling to do and to be, is often at odds with our occupation, of what we do. So it is a challenge to see how we are to go, then, and deal with the work that we have.

And so it's going to follow a flow this month. Last week, “Work As It Ought to Be.” This week is “Work As It Is.” Next week, “Work As It Can Be.” And then we will look at is there work on the renewed heavens and earth: “Work As It Will Be.” The desire here is to demonstrate that there is a four-chapter. . .four great themes of scripture: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. Work is impacted by all four of these and in different ways. But this week we're going to look at “Work As It Is.” We're going to look together at Genesis 11:1-4. But of course I'll be referencing the remainder of the narrative as we go along. Seeing now after the fall—this is after the flood, and man is seeking to live life. What happens? Genesis 11:1-4.

<sup>1</sup> Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. <sup>2</sup> And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup> And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. <sup>4</sup> Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Again, will you pray with me. Now, Lord, we ask that you would take your Word and enable us to see what is happening in this part of your Word. And I pray that by your Holy Spirit, through your Word, we might gain a greater understanding of work as it is, perhaps as we often experience it. But then we ask oh, Lord, as we seek to apply this Word, may we find hope in the gospel. Do this, we pray, and help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

One of the interesting things as we think about the idea of this passage, is we see in it man committed to doing work. We see in this passage that—we believe it's somewhere in southern Mesopotamia—they are seeking to build a city. And their desire was to make a place for themselves to experience life, to have families, and to do business. And what we see here is a

number of things that are very common to our human experience. And so what I want to do this morning is see the two principal things that come out of this passage directly, and then understand what is—if it is similar to what we experience—then what oftentimes is the consequence.

And you see that in your outline. First, what we recognize in their building of these things is their desire for **Achievement**. Secondly, we also sense there is **Fear**. But all of that also brings a great **Burden**. So **Achievement, Fear, and Burden**. Before we go any further, what I want to do is—whether you are a Christian or not or however long, if you're a new Christian—it is easy to look back to passages like this and think, *Well, they were just. . . You know, that was primeval. . . It was. . . That's not really of importance. . . They were just sort of old school. . . We don't really. . . We're beyond that.* And what we will see is we are so not beyond this. And that oftentimes what we see in their motivations are also the kind of motivations we feel, the fears that we feel, but also a burden.

So looking together at “Work As It Is” by looking together at the **Achievement**. Look again at Verse 1 and following. So this is now after the flood. The earth is experiencing new life after it. Men and women are having families, and they are growing in size, and they have, according to the text, one language. And so in their migration they found a place that was of value, a good place to have gardens and to set up crops to sustain themselves. But then you see in Verse 3 that they gather together. We don't know how many. Perhaps it was the recognized leaders and they desired to build something. And it says, “Come, let us,” or “Let us go.” And this is a repeated idea for them. Let us go and make bricks, burn them thoroughly. And so we know from archaeological data that this was not Babylon or what is modern day, perhaps, Iran or Iraq and that area, but there is certainly a place where this kind of stone and bitumen, which would have been used for mortar, is common, and can be found even then.

It isn't the fact that they desired to build something that is problematic. What we see, however, is not so much the ‘what’ that they are doing, it is what is their motivation for what they are doing. And you see this in Verse 4. “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the earth.” So first let's look at how and what they desired to achieve. Is building a tower a good thing? Absolutely. Not a bad idea. Towers can be used for various things. It isn't in and of itself a bad thing. They're wanting to build a city. A city is a good place for commerce. A city is a good place for sharing of things so that you can have a fuller life—a way of building and sustaining relationships and community.

But what is clearly in their motivational radar is the desire to be great. And this is on the heels of what we looked at last week. That [although] God had created work as it ought to be, vocation and occupation together as a reflection of who he is as God, because of sin, now work doesn't become a way in which we reflect who God is. Work becomes a way that we replace God and what he offers. And so instead of saying we want to build this so that we can make God's name great, work now becomes a means by which we attain status for ourselves. It is very clear that a part of their achievement is a desire for status when it states, “Come, let us make a name for ourselves.” The whole idea is that we are doing this so that we can be great. We see it in their desire to build a tower *up to the heavens*. This is important because in some way it is very clearly trying to demonstrate that they are greater than who God is, or the same greatness—whether they even acknowledge the God of Creation or not, they are saying we want to be great. This is living out of what Tim Keller calls the DNA of self-centeredness and

competitive pride. It's not just competition. It's competitive pride. The desire to achieve, to gain status over against something or someone else. To be great. And so their desire was to build a status for themselves.

But also built within it, it's not just a desire for status and achievement, it's also deeply bound within of how they viewed themselves. We want to be great. We have a common language. We are great. So therefore, it isn't just building a tower for utilitarian reasons, it's to build a tower as an expression of what they believe themselves to be. Their identity is deeply bound up in what they are doing. And so work as it is can easily become a way in which we seek achievement by way of status. I want to be great, and I want to be greater than others. And to do so with competitive pride and not a giving away of serving others, but a desire to build a bigger house, a bigger name, a bigger place. Because that's what I believe of myself. And so what I build, what I invest myself in—then in my work it becomes deeply intertwined in my identity.

This is something that actually has been gotten to by one of the great commentators, Derek Kidner, when he talks about this passage. And he says, “The elements of the story are timelessly characteristic of the spirit of the world. The project is typically grandiose. Men describe it excitedly to one another as if it were the ultimate achievement, very much as modern man glories in his space projects. At the same time they betray their insecurity as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes.” You see, they're wanting to control their fortunes because the fear that—which we'll get into in a moment—they will be scattered around the earth. Work, because it is often divorced as an expression of who God is and our work directed towards giving God glory through our work, it then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that we desire to be great, and the way I will do it is through my work.

But let me be clear in suggesting and demonstrating that building something beautiful, building something great, even achieving great things is not in and of itself unbiblical or wrong. The problem becomes when the achievement is divorced from the One who has created us. Therefore, that achievement no longer has divine or gospel roots or a desire to make God's name great. And when it doesn't have gospel roots, work then becomes a way—instead of reflecting the image of God, it is to replace him. And when it doesn't work out, we begin to question our own value as people. And whether you have achieved great things financially by your work or whatever the case may be, or through your education, or through whatever it is that you go about doing, if you are very good at it there is nothing in and of itself that is wrong with those achievements. But when it becomes divorced from God, it becomes something completely different. We become bound up in seeing in the reflection of our work the value of self.

And if you have not achieved those things and you live in this county where achievement and education and degrees are held up to such a high standard, do you feel as though you've missed out or somehow you have less value? If that is the case, then we are experiencing work as it is as a result of the fall. We were never intended to find our identity, our value, through our work. While it might be an expression of who we are, our value isn't coming from it or what we achieve, whether you've achieved much or—relative to what you think the culture says—you've achieved little. Work divorced from God becomes a way in which we make our names great. It was happening then, and it still happens now.

But God responds to the achievement. Notice what he says. I'll begin reading in Verse 5.

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down. . .

By the way, that's borrowing on the language of the people when they said, 'Come, let us build.' God says:

Come, let us go down and confuse their language.

Which by the way, the word 'confuse' comes from the same root or the same letters as we get the word *Babel*, which meant 'gate of God.' So now God is responding to man and saying:

Come, let us go down and confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth. [Genesis 11:5-9

The question that often naturally arises is: Did God feel that man was in competition with him, and that if he didn't do something they would overthrow him? That could be one reading of the text. I would differ with that reading, but it's certainly a reading. What's interesting is it's all said within a context. That God has been dealing with the heart of man and his desires and his thoughts. For God made man and knows that his desire is not to be a relationship with him, but to go against him. And that his thoughts are evil even from his youth. And that what man is consumed with is himself. So actually the reading is not that God feared competition with man, but rather he understood what man was capable of doing. And that it would not be, you know, *Kum bah ya*, where everybody gathers together in this great city and oh, isn't it wonderful. Because very closely followed behind this common tower, common city, with a common language, there would have been the haves and the have nots. Oppression and competition would have gone to further root, and evil would have grown even greater and at greater speed. So actually God seeking to bring judgment and even confusing of the language is not God's fear. I would argue and postulate that it is actually his grace, because he recognizes how easily man would have turned that against himself.

But let's go further. The one that was actually full of fear is not God, but rather it is man. You hear it when they utter these words: "Come, let us make bricks and burn them." Because ~~if~~ we ~~don't~~ [must] come and make our names great, ~~then~~ ~~lest~~ we [must] make a name great for ourselves, "lest we be dispersed over the face of all the earth." Their **Fear**, first and foremost, was one of loss. That unless they stored up now and do it quickly, they actually run the risk of losing their commonly held wealth and value. They had both a real fear, but also a fear of the possible loss.

Let me say to you that this fear is what drives so much injustice and oppression in the Scriptures. Even a casual reading—throughout the Scriptures you will see that God has judgment on those who seek to go about their work with unjust weights, meaning when they sell products, but they're not weighing them correctly. But only at the person who's selling and their advancement and advantage. Why would they do that? Because if they don't make as

much as they possibly can from each transaction, I will not have enough. God brings judgment and has great things to say, greatly difficult things to say about those who operate with unjust weights. But that unjust weight is motivated because of fear. As well as God goes to great lengths when he deals with his people, when he instructs them how they're to live in the world. When they plant gardens and fields, they're actually to reserve a portion of their field so that others that do not have can come along and glean and provide for themselves. But God judged Israel and that because they refused to do that. Why would Israel refuse to hold out portions of their land for gleaning for those who do not have? Because they feared they would not have enough for themselves.

One could even argue then when Jesus comes into the temple during Passover and he takes the money changers' tables and in a moment of divinely inspired anger overturns the tables and seeks to say that this is a house of prayer, this is my Father's house—what was Jesus actually mad at? Was he mad at the fact that people sell things and make money? No. It's the fact that they were turning that Passover into [the way that] many treat our Christmases now. That if I don't make my money now at Passover, I won't have enough the rest of the year. What better place to set up shop than actually in the temple. So they were taking advantage because of a fear of loss really or perceived loss. It goes right all the way back, and we see it here in Genesis 11. We will be dispersed; we will lose.

In addition, not only will they potentially lose something—and that's what they are fearing—there is something deeply embedded in these words. That when it says: “Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name great for ourselves, lest we be dispersed...” If you're dispersed, so is your power. Meaning this. They have feared exposure for being found out for what they are. They're not as strong—and often we're not as strong as we like to think we are. And so much of our work is often done out of fear of exposure. Years ago in Philadelphia there were widely reported private interviews done with top CEO's of Fortune 500 companies. When they asked them what their number one fear was, their number one fear was being found out that maybe they were not as knowledgeable and as capable as people believe them to be. Now imagine that as being the number one fear. And that is precisely oftentimes why our work can be so frustrating or why we're fearful of feedback or learning from others. Because maybe we will be exposed. Why do we fear these things? It is because work has been divorced, because of sin, from who God is. And so when he says I will provide for you, you do not need to worry or to be anxious—but what we begin to experience is anxiety and fear.

There are profoundly contemporary problems happening in Genesis 11. They were expressing what is at the root of the heart of man. We were meant to give God glory and to achieve great things. But because sin has separated us from a relationship with God, that sin has brought brokenness. But brokenness beyond just our relationship with God—it brings it into our daily experience of work. Achievement and fear are not the only things we experience in work as it is today, but it is a lot of what takes up space. When you begin reading a lot of books, when you begin looking at what is written about in the newspaper in the business section—from the Harvard Business Review all the way to Time magazine, Washington Post, and the New York Times. If you look at how much anxiety and fear and the desire for achievement is a part of the water that we swim in in our culture, then we are not paying attention.

And I am not exempt from these things. I have mentioned it to you before. But I do recall very vividly being two or three years in to planting the church in Redeemer Montclair, Montclair,

New Jersey, and a man that I went to at college was also a pastor serving in a different part of the country. In two years his church went to ten thousand. We were laboring to get above a hundred. Now I would like to say that I could just sit back and go, pfft, come on. I mean, my friends were writing articles. Some were even writing books. Some were being asked to speak at conferences. It can easily seep right into the heart of a pastor. I felt it. And I had to look at my own heart and see how and in what way is my identity being bound up in achievement as a pastor. And that is not uncommon than many of the conversations I've had with different people across congregations that I've had the pleasure to serve.

But what begins to happen, the result of achievement and fear also leads to **Burden**. And those burdens are often bound up in expectations. I see this most principally because of the expectations that many students place on themselves and the expectations that are placed on them by family and friends or even the institution where they study. This is why it is at an epidemic, the addiction to Adderall among college students. Adderall being a drug that they can take that's actually just meant to be taken for A.D.D., but is now taken to regain and retain focus, so that they can—as students have reported—they can live a study life and they can stay up late to go hang out with their friends. To get ahead. Expectations oftentimes motivate us to all kinds of behavior. It leads to expectations that we believe not only does the culture have on us, but what we put on ourselves. What our spouses—what we believe our spouses want. And so we work so hard to try to keep everything fixed. All the plates spinning. And we run ourselves ragged and tiredness and the lack of sleep, short-tempered and anger so easily begins to affect all of life. Because these expectations become a burden.

But also difficulties. Difficulties and even talking about different kinds of ways to live life. Not only has sin impacted the way we experience work in these areas, it's also impacted even the way—let's just speak about the church—the way the church even talks about work. Those of you who are stay at home moms and those of you who are moms who work full time—you know the expectations you have on you, relative to wherever God has you. And how much tension is built up because of the issues of fear and achievement, even infect (?) all kinds of those conversations. That you want to have it all. Or I don't want to have it all, I'm just trying to provide for my family. But you feel the tension, the desire, the need to want to care for your children. And then those who are stay at home moms they feel like well, am I doing enough? I would like to be out working, as well. And so there's this tension that builds even among those groups even within the church. It becomes a minefield even for us to talk about these things. It's because the problem is not that you want to work and have children. The problem is not that you want to stay home and care for your children. The problem is not that you want to have a great job and actually enjoy what you do. That is not the problem.

The problem is sin has infected our work—even the way we talk about it. And the reason why we're doing this series is to say that God cares about the work that we do Monday through Friday. For us to find meaning and value in the work that we do as an expression of our worship. He actually intends for us to see that the gospel is not meant to just be pigeonholed into Sunday mornings. And the gospel doesn't just have something to say about what we do or how we do it, but also how we talk about it. To have patience with one another, praying and supporting one another. It is to say that the gospel actually enables us to even say I want to have great achievement. The question is for what end.

I give to you this one from the former CEO of Service Master, as I close. His name is William Pollard. He says this. "As a business person I want to excel at generating profits and creating

value for shareholders. If I don't want to play by these rules, I don't belong in the ballgame. But I also believe that the business firm I work in has another purpose. It could be a community to help shape human character and behavior. It should be an open environment where the question of who God is and who we are and how we relate our faith to our work are issues for discussion, debate, and yes, even learning and understanding. The people of our firm are in fact the soul of the firm." So what you see there, is you begin to see someone who's wrestled with the pressure towards achievement. But someone who also understands that it's not meant for achievement's sake or making his name great, but rather as a space where we can use the gifts that we have, use them to their best degree wherever God has us, for his glory—so that we can help provide for others, provide for our families. But also that the gospel can make us patient—a patient people and a praying people and a cognizant people.

That many of you struggle with many different fears and anxieties and expectations. Some of you have found it hard to have these discussions in this space. The gospel does instruct us and call us, that this might be a place, a body of Christ, where we can talk about these very issues. To pray, Lord, this is not the way work ought to be, but it is the way it is. But we don't want to get stuck here. Please, by the grace of Christ—because he came more than just to forgive us of our sins through his body and blood, but rather he came to bring about restoration, even in work, even in the way we talk about it, even for the goals that we have. Will you then enable us, as we come around this table today to celebrate as a common people around a common Savior, around a common cross, for a common forgiveness—will you give us more than just that? Will you also give us the grace to face this week and the work that we have to do with a very different perspective? Will you enable me to have ears to hear the struggles and the hurts and the expectations of that stay at home parent or that parent who's also trying to balance work and family? Will you also help me to deal with the actual messages I received as a youth, that my father or mother was not going to be happy unless I achieved it. And yes, I'm a Christian, but I still feel the pressure to try to achieve something, because I even want to make my parents happy, even though I'm in my mid-forties.

In other words, Lord, by this table will you give us the grace. Yes, to see work as it is, but also will you demonstrate to us that you set a table of grace for us in the midst of it? May the Lord do this in us. And may we continue to push and learn, ask, and grow together to address faith and work together. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we ask that you would enable us now to bring all that we are and the work that we do—regardless of its expression. As we come to the table this morning may we bring these burdens, may we bring our fears, may we even bring our achievements. And bring them to you and give them to you and submit them to you, because you died for us even when we did not know you. While we were yet your enemies, Christ died for us. So Lord, as we submit these things to you, as we eat of this bread and we drink of this cup, will you give us grace, then, to see your presence and your hand at work. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.