

Introduction

A warm welcome to everyone, and especially to the visitors here today. Speaking on behalf of the elders, we are delighted you have chosen to spend your Sunday morning with us, and we trust that the service has been and will continue to be a blessing to you.

Before I begin the message I want to publicly thank all of you who have been praying for me and my health. As Sandy said last week, this is a great congregation! As most of you know, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer about 10 months ago, and since then I have had hormone therapy and radiation treatments. These have ended, although I am still feeling some aftereffects of the hormone therapy, and I had my first diagnostic test last Friday. This showed that my PSA cancer marker is at an undetectable level, which is great news, but it is not the end of the story. I need to be tested regularly for the next few years, to be sure that the cancer has not returned, so please keep on praying!

Also as most of you know, our sermon series this Fall has been on selected passages from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians. Our title today is "Your work matters to God".

It is the next to last message in the series, and is based on Colossians 3:22-4:1

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven. (NIV)

This morning I will focus on verse 23

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

I do not have time to talk about the other important aspect of this passage, which is the fact that it was written to slaves and masters. Paul did not condone slavery, but his mission was to preach the gospel. However, in his letter to Philemon, a member of the church at Colossae, he sounded the death knell of slavery when he wrote Philemon 15-16 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.

So if you feel that you are working like a slave (perhaps as a graduate student in chemistry) this message is for you too.

1. The importance of work

The first thing that we need to understand is the *importance of work*. And just so that there is no misunderstanding, I am not talking only about paid work. Certainly getting paid for what you do is nice, but many people work hard without receiving money as a reward. Many women and some men work hard at running a home, working as a combination of child psychologist, cook, chauffeur, cleaner, shopper, and many other tasks. Others work as caregivers, or volunteers at the Food Pantry or in serving this church, whether through teaching Sunday School, painting rooms, counting the offerings each Sunday, or doing any of the dozens of other volunteer tasks that are needed for this church to function effectively. And by this broad definition, work is what most of us do for most of our time; eating and sleeping are the other major ways we use our time, but for most of us work is the major way we spend our time. So it is really important that we understand God's view of work.

We can get a glimpse of God's view of work from the Bible. For example...

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom." Ecclesiastes 9:10, NIV

He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Eph 4:28, NIV

All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty. Prov 14:23 NIV

So our work is important in God's eyes. But before we explore this in more detail, we need to look at the way our understanding often differs from God's.

2. Incorrect views of work

a. Sacred vs. secular. If you are like many Christians, you probably have sort of hierarchy of the importance of different kinds of work in your mind. At the very top are fulltime Christian workers doing "sacred" work: missionaries and pastors. And then comes everyone else doing "secular" work: First workers in the helping professions; doctors, lawyers, nurses, counselors. Then teachers, then workers in industry or in business, then homemakers, and finally, at the very bottom, come the homeless and professors of organic chemistry. But this is completely unbiblical! It derives from Greek philosophy, but it infected some early Christian theologians like Eusebius (AD 265-340), who wrote that fulltime Christian workers, devoted to the service of God alone, embody the perfect form of the Christian life, while farmers and traders could only achieve a sort of secondary grade of piety.

But our text says something different:

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving." What Paul is saying is that all work is work done for God if we do it in as unto Him; it is not only missionaries and pastors who are serving the Lord, it is you and me as we go about our daily work. Our secular work matters to God.

The English mystery writer Dorothy Sayers put it this way in her book "Creed or Chaos" (Dorothy Sayers, Creed or Chaos, pages 77-78)...

"In nothing has the church so lost her hold on reality as in her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments, and is astonished to find that, as a result, the secular work of the world is turned to purely selfish and destructive ends, and that the greater part of the world's intelligent workers have become irreligious, or at least, uninterested in religion. **But is it astonishing?** How can anyone remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his life?"

The church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes on him is to make good tables"

b. Work as a curse. Another wrong view of work is that it is a curse. This view is probably based on God's words to Adam in Gen 3:17 "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life." The English singers Flanders and Swann expressed this view in their song "The First and Second Laws"

*Heat is work and work's a curse
And all the heat in the universe
It's gonna cool down as it can't increase
Then there'll be no more work
And they'll be perfect peace
Really? Yeah, that's entropy, man!*

But we know that this is wrong, because God Himself is a worker:

Gen 2:2-3 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

So clearly work itself is not a curse.

3. Why does our work matter to God?

a. Because we matter to God. One of the most familiar verses in the Bible is John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

This verse, and many others like it, remind us that God loves us so much that he gave his Son Jesus to die a cruel death on the cross for you and for me. And if God loves us and cares for us this much, then we must matter a whole lot to Him. And if we matter to Him, then how we live our lives matters to Him. And since work is such an important part of our lives, *how we do our work matters to God.*

b. Because other people matter to God. Not only does God love us individually, He also loves the whole world. How we do our work affects not only ourselves but others, and our work can be a curse or a blessing, depending on how we do it.

4. What is the purpose of our work?

a. To serve other people.

Our work, whether paid or unpaid, enables us to serve other people. In most areas of work we are serving others as well as our bosses, whether we are repairing a roof, repairing a tooth, keeping track of a budget, or teaching a class.

b. To worship and serve Jesus Christ.

Eph 6:5-8 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

c. To provide for our needs and the needs of our families.

1 Tim 5:7-8 If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

d. To earn the resources to share with others.

Eph 4:28 He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

e. To show our love for God.

One of God's love languages is obedience. When we work, we are obeying His two great commandments to love Him and love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Matt 22:36-40 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

We love God by obeying Him from the heart. We love our neighbor as we serve other people through our work.

5. How then should we work?

a. *As unto the Lord.* This is the key to everything. As we have already seen, we are to see all our work as being work for the Lord:

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, Col. 3:23. And to the Ephesians Eph 6:7-8 Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men.

Sue Bohlin, a staff worker with Probe Ministries, wrote this on the subject:

It's helpful to envision that behind every employer stands the Lord Jesus. He sees everything we do, and He appreciates it and will reward us, regardless of the type of work we do. I learned this lesson one day when I was cleaning the grungy bathtub of a family that wouldn't notice and would never acknowledge or thank me even if they did. I was getting madder by the minute, throwing myself a pity party, when the Lord broke into my thoughts. He quietly said, "I see you. And I appreciate what you're doing." Whoa! In an instant, that totally changed everything. Suddenly, I was able to do a menial job—and later on, more important ones—as a labor of love and worship for Jesus. I know He sees and appreciates what I do. It forever changed my view of work.

This will change your view of work too!

“Teach me, my God and King,
in all things thee to see,
and what I do in anything
to do it as for thee.

“A servant with this clause
makes drudgery divine:
who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
makes that and the action fine.

“This is the famous stone
that turneth all to gold;
for that which God doth touch and own
cannot for less be told.”

(--George Herbert, 1633)

b. *With integrity.* We cannot truly work “as unto the Lord” unless we do our work honestly. And yet sadly it appears that there is not a lot of difference between how “Churched” people and “Unchurched” people behave at work. The numbers are from a Gallup Survey in 1983, but they are probably not much different today.

Slide

Action	Churched %	Unchurched %
Taking home work supplies such as pens, papers, building materials	37	43
Called in sick to work when not ill	27	37
Overstated deductions on their income tax form	11	14
Understated income on their income tax form	10	9
Overstated qualifications on resume	5	9
Seen an employee steal something and not report it	26	25
Driven while drunk	28	40

If we are to work “as unto the Lord”, we must be completely honest in our work. And we need to remember that we are ambassadors for Christ; for many of our co-workers we may be the only Christian they know.

c. *With enthusiasm, as the Lord has gifted us*

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might" Ecclesiastes 9:10a, NIV

God has made us unique individuals with our own unique gifts and talents. When we serve according to these gifts we are able to work with enthusiasm and with the motivation to be distinctive.

In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, the Christian runner Eric Liddell says: "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure."

Mark Lanier is a successful (and wealthy) trial lawyer in Texas who sees his work as a service to God. He says "I represent widows and orphans, and I cry out for justice for the underprivileged masses. Jesus would have been a plaintiff's lawyer" He was and is passionate about studying Scripture, and when he graduated from college in 1986, he considered becoming either a lawyer or a church teacher. His pastor, Ken Dye, encouraged him to pursue law, telling him that if he were to succeed at law he could teach adults Sunday School at his church and so pay his own way to pursue his passion. He uses his wealth to serve God in many different ways. (Christianity Today, December 2014, p. 50)

R.G. LeTourneau (1888-1969), was a successful businessman; his factories supplied 70 percent of all heavy earthmoving equipment used by the Allied forces during World War II, and he held over 300 patents. He wrestled with the secular versus full-time Christian work idea, and as a young man he recounts the turning point in his understanding of how God desires to use business for His glory. His pastor one day said to him, "You know, brother LeTourneau, God needs businessmen as well as preachers and missionaries." "Those were the words that guided my life ever since," said LeTourneau. "I repeat them in public at every opportunity because I have discovered that many men have the same mistaken idea I had of what it means to serve the Lord. My idea was if a man was going all out for God, he would have to be a preacher, or evangelist, or a missionary, or what we call a full-time Christian worker. I didn't realize that a layman could serve the Lord as well as a preacher. I left the parsonage in sort of a daze. If God needed businessmen, he could certainly find a lot better material than a dirt-mover with a lot of debts piled up in the garage business. But I said, 'All right, if that is what God wants me to be, I'll try to be His businessman.'" LeTourneau later became known for his generosity for giving 90% of his income to Christian causes.

We may not be called to be lawyers or heavy equipment makers, but we are all called to serve the Lord through our work, to do our work as unto the Lord, with integrity and enthusiasm.

6. The reward of work

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Colossians 3:23-24

Just two thoughts here:

- a. Since our work is for the Lord, our ultimate reward comes from the Lord. This is true whether we doing the dishes, making the bed, caring for a loved one, diagnosing and treating disease, raising a child, running a business, or even teaching organic chemistry!
- b. Since our work is for the Lord, it cannot be work that dishonors Him. Work as a professional thief, for example, or as a drug dealer, cannot be done as unto the Lord.
- c. God does not want us to do holy things, He wants us to be holy people.

7. Questions to think about

- a. Does your faith in Jesus Christ make a difference to the way you do your work? How does it?
- b. Do you think that some kinds of work (such as being a pastor or a missionary) are more important than others (such as being a homemaker or a businessperson)
- c. If you are not yet settled in your life's work, how will the fact that your work is unto the Lord affect your decision about how to use your God-given gifts? The Lord can use you wherever you give yourself

to serve Him, and the world needs Christian artists and musicians and writers and newspaper editors just as much as it needs Christian pastors and teachers. Let God's gifting and your heart's desires be your guide.

- d. Can you go to work tomorrow rejoicing that you are serving the Lord in your work?

Sadly few current hymn books contain any hymns on the blessings of work. But Charles Wesley wrote several for the new believers that became to the Lord through his brother John's ministry, and we are going to sing one of these in closing. The words may be a little archaic, but the truths are timeless. Here are the first two verses, and Chris will come up to lead us as we sing; may the words of this hymn be our prayer as we go forth to serve the Lord

1 Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I go,
My daily labor to pursue;
Thee, only Thee, resolved to know
In all I think, or speak, or do.

2 The task Thy wisdom hath assigned
O let me cheerfully fulfill;
In all my works Thy presence find,
And prove Thy good and perfect will.

5 For Thee delightfully employ
Whate'er Thy bounteous grace hath given,
And run my course with even joy,
And closely walk with Thee to Heaven.

(--Charles Wesley, 1749)