

Introduction

Good morning, and let me again welcome those of you who are visiting with us today. It is my hope and prayer that the Lord will bless you and everyone who hears these words from His holy word.

This is the third message in our summer series “Between Two Worlds”.

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This title speaks to the truth that those of us who are Christ-followers are living as citizens of two worlds. We are all citizens of some country; for many of us this is the USA, but for others it will be the country of our birth, and let me just add that it is great to see people here from many other countries. But those of us who are Christ-followers are also living as citizens of God’s kingdom; we have sworn allegiance to another king, King Jesus. And so the question we all must face is “How should I live as a citizen of two worlds?” This is not a simple question, because we know that the world we live in is far from perfect; it is a world where suffering and cruelty and oppression are strong, and where many people live lives of quiet despair, and a world where our enemy the devil is free to bring about his evil designs on men and women.

So how are we as Christ-followers to live between two worlds? And specifically, what does it mean to work so that our work is pleasing to God? I have titled this message “Your work matters to God”.

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It is my hope that each of us will leave this morning with this message clearly imprinted in your mind, so that if someone asks you tomorrow “What did you learn at church yesterday?” you will be able to respond “I learned and I now know that my work is important because it matters to God”

So let us dig into the Bible to see what it teaches us on the subject of work.

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1. Work is an important subject in the Bible

Did you know that there are more than 800 verses in the Bible that speak about work or labor or some similar word? This is more than the combined total of verses that speak about worship, music, praise, and singing. Now of course a simple verse count does not necessarily mean that work is more important than worship, but it does at least give us a clue that it is something we should pay attention to.

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2. Work is not the same thing as employment

We must be careful here, because we have this terrible tendency to evaluate others by the nature of their employment. When a man meets another man one of the first questions asked is “what do you do?”, meaning “what sort of job do you have?” And then we have this probably rank him in our minds according to some sort of scale in which doctors come out at the top and maybe members of congress of the wrong party come out at the bottom. But this is not the right way to view work, since many people work who are not employed. Women raising families, volunteers in this or other churches, and volunteers in organizations such as the Blacksburg Interfaith Food Pantry and the Rescue Mission in Roanoke all work, some of them with long and hard hours, but they are not paid for their work. So although employment necessarily involves work of some kind (and if it does not that job is likely to be short lived), work itself is much broader and includes service to others as well as service to a salary-paying organization. The late English Bible scholar John Stott defines work in this way:

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Work is the expenditure of energy (manual or mental or both) in the service of others, which brings fulfillment to the worker, benefit to the community, and glory to God.

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3. The Biblical Teaching on Work

a. Work is God’s idea

The Bible begins with the words (Gen 1:1) ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’. Note it does not say “In the beginning God sat majestic in the heavens.” He created. He did something. He made something. He fashioned heaven and earth. The week of creation was a week of work. And so the end of the creation story in Gen 2:2 reads “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 the prophet Isaiah, speaking of God’s creative work asks the question

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Isa 40:12-14

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,
or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?

Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket,
or weighed the mountains on the scales
and the hills in a balance?

Who has understood the mind of the LORD,
or instructed him as his counselor?

Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him,
and who taught him the right way?

Who was it that taught him knowledge
or showed him the path of understanding?

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Or in other words, who employed God to do this? And of course the answer is “no one”. God acted out of his own power and love in creating the world. And since the subject of God’s creation has come up, I cannot resist sharing a quotation by G. K. Chesterton that I came across in preparing for this message:

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“It is absurd for the Evolutionist to complain that it is unthinkable for an admittedly unthinkable God to make everything out of nothing, and then pretend that it is more thinkable that nothing should turn itself into everything.” G. K. Chesterton

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b. Work is an important part of God’s plan for men and women

Gen 2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. It is important to note that this is before Adam and Eve fell into sin, so work itself is not the result of sin; it is part of God’s plan from the beginning of time.

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And it was God who gave us and still gives us the basis of work. Mark Noll, in his book *“The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind”* has this to say:

“Who formed the world of nature (which provides the raw material for physical sciences)? Who formed the universe of human interactions (which is the raw material of politics, economics, sociology, and history)? Who is the source of all harmony, form, and narrative pattern (which is the raw material for art?) Who is the source of the human mind (which is the raw material for philosophy and psychology?) And who, moment by moment, maintains the connection between our minds and the world beyond our minds? God did, God does.”

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c. Work is for a lifetime

Gen 3:19

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 return.”

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Meaningful activity is important to our lives, whether it is paid or not. Some of us may be dreaming of a time of complete idleness, rather like resting in sunshine all day

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But this is not how God made us. He made us as men and women who follow his plan, and this involves work of some kind all our lives. The nature of the work will change, but our need to work to live lives of satisfaction does not change.

Now don't misunderstand me here. Leisure and rest are important parts of our lives. We need to work but we also need to rest. God Himself rested, as we already saw from Gen 2:2 "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work." So periods of leisure are good and necessary to our health and well-being. Work and leisure are meant to go together as a sort of "package deal"; leisure is enhanced by being preceded by diligent work, and results in our ability to do more diligent work. But idleness, the spending of all one's time in watching TV or going round as the neighborhood gossip, is not a good use of the time God has given each of us. Paul writes to young widows when he says

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1 Tim 5:13-14 "they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to. So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander."

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d. A Christian's Work is ultimately for the Lord.

Col 3:22-24 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. Let's unpack this verse. It was written by the apostle Paul to the Christ-followers in the Roman city of Colosse, and this particular section was written to slaves; to the lowest of the low in the Roman system. Some of these became Christian believers, and part of the church in Colosse, so the full section reads

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Col 3:22-25

22 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. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

These verses teach the slaves of Colosse that the person they are really serving is the Lord Jesus. Yes, they are slaves. Yes, they have to obey their masters or face a beating or worse. But Paul tells them that ultimately they are serving the Lord; as they serve their earthly master they are serving God Himself. We are not slaves, but the same principle applies to us; as we work in our own workplaces, whether it is washing dishes and making beds at home or washing glassware and making chemical reactions in the laboratory, or selling houses or nursing sick people or teaching children or teaching business or serving as a waitress or any of the many different occupations we have – whatever it is, we can know that we are serving the Lord. And because our work is to be done as to the Lord, it must be done to the very best of our ability. Let us suppose that you are a cabinet maker, and someone from the Governor's office calls to say that the Governor wants you to make some cabinets for his new home. You would be honored to receive this commission, and you would work to make the very best cabinets that you could for the Governor. But if you would make the very best possible cabinet for the Governor, should you not also make the very best cabinet for the Lord? Even if your customer is Mr. Smith, who is a difficult customer to deal with?

In the Lord's providence, as I was writing these words last evening my wife Beverly came to tell me that the drain from our kitchen sink was clogged up and leaking out of a floor drain in the garage, and so I spent the next 30 minutes working with Beverly in the garage to clean out the drain as unto the Lord.

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e. A Christian's Work will be rewarded by the Lord

Col 3:22-24 "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 want to share an example of this teaching, and that is that of our late brother Paul Ribbe. Many of you knew him well, but many of you do not know him, so let me tell you a little about him.

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As you know, Paul went to be with the Lord early yesterday morning, after a short battle with brain cancer, and only a few weeks after his beloved wife Elna passed away on May 1. Paul and I go back a long way. We first met when we were both graduate students at Cambridge University in England; he in mineralogy and I in chemistry. We met at Zion Baptist Church, and Paul and Elna took pity on me as a single and rather skinny student, and invited me to their home on several occasions for American-style home cooked meals, which were greatly appreciated. We parted ways when we both graduated, but we were reunited in 1971 when I moved to Blacksburg. About two years before I arrived Paul and Elna and four other families had founded Blacksburg Christian Fellowship, with the aim of it being a church that preached the word of God and encouraged ministry to students. Paul was the most energetic of the elders, and although I was not around at the very beginning it is probably true to say that without him BCF would not exist today. However, my real point is that Paul was a man who was a wonderful example of someone who worked at his work with all his heart, as working for the Lord. He was a Professor of Mineralogy at Virginia Tech, and greatly respected for his research and teaching. Among other achievements he founded and was the Editor for 30 years, from 1974-2004, of the series *Reviews in Mineralogy & Geochemistry*. He also taught hundreds of students, two of whom later took jobs at VT and are now University Distinguished Professors. In addition to all this he spent a major part of his time serving the Lord in Blacksburg. He wrote a brief autobiography in which he described himself as follows: “My spare-time pursuits: Teaching, preaching, marrying, overseeing, etc. as a BCF Elder; at home: landscaping, traveling and supporting my wife for 33 years as Teaching Leader of Bible Study Fellowship. She wondrously supported me for the past 58+ years! The secret of our strong marriage: We both had the same calling — a life-long commitment to serving and proclaiming Jesus.” And Paul lived what he taught, serving the Lord on the VT campus and through BCF for almost 50 years. And because of this I can tell you with confidence that verse 24 is true for him “since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. And so our Lord Christ has greeted him with the words: “well done, good and faithful servant”.

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4. Some problems of work

a. Making work our god. The Bible repeatedly warns us about the dangers of idolatry, and anything that is more important to us than God is an idol in God’s sight. This is probably more of a problem for the academics among us than for some others, but if work dominates our life to the exclusion or neglect of our Christian faith and our family, then it has become an idol. As Christians we must find our identity in Christ, not in our work.

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b. Separating our work from our worship. A second danger is that we compartmentalize our lives. On Sunday we are pious Christians, singing God’s praises with delight and listening attentively to the sermons. But on Monday all that is forgotten, and think that God is not interested in our work. So we ignore Him and we become consumed with our work and never give God a thought until Sunday comes again. We are not so much “living between two worlds” as “hopping back and forth between two worlds”

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c. Thinking that paid employment is more important than unpaid work. This error is a common one, and obviously paid employment is necessary for a family to survive. But let me speak frankly to the husbands here who have stay at home wives, and especially to those husbands and wives who are raising children. The Christian family is the bulwark of the church, and the church is only one generation away from disappearing. The homemaker who is teaching and raising her children to know the Lord is a key partner in the preservation of the gospel.

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C. S. Lewis stated “The homemaker has the ultimate career. All other careers exist for one purpose only - and that is to support the ultimate career.” And the ever quotable G. K. Chesterton, speaking about the role of the mother, put it this way when people were commenting on the limitations in the life of a mother:

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To be like Queen Victoria within a definite area, deciding banquets, labors and holidays; to be like a department store within a certain area, providing toys, boots, sheets, cakes, and books; to be Aristotle within a certain area, teaching morals, manners, theology, and hygiene; I can understand how this might exhaust the mind, but I cannot imagine how it could narrow it. How can it be a large career to tell other people's children about the Rule of Three, and a small career to tell one's own children about the universe? How can it be broad to be the same thing to everyone, and narrow to be everything to someone? No; a woman's function is laborious, but because it is gigantic, not because it is minute. I will pity Mrs. Jones for the hugeness of her task; I will never pity her for its smallness.

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d. Thinking that there are two kinds of work, the sacred and the secular. This is also a common error, especially in churches that have a clear separation between “clergy” and “laity”. In this error we think that certain jobs are worth more to God than others, so we exalt missionaries and pastors and theologians as “super Christians” and downgrade plumbers and teachers and housewives as “ordinary Christians”. But this is not a biblical idea. Paul says “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,” and there is no hint that one kind of work is superior to another. John Gardner, former President of the Carnegie Corporation and Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare from 1965-68, wrote perceptively

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“The society which scorns excellence in plumbing as a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have **neither** good plumbing **nor** good philosophy: **neither its pipes nor its theories** will hold water.” (John W. Gardner)

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e. The problem of unemployment. Some of you hearing these words may be saying “Well, that is all fine for those who have jobs, but I was laid off from my job three months ago and I have not been able to find another one”. And this is an increasingly likely scenario as this country goes through all sorts of growing pains with new technologies taking over and jobs being outsourced to other countries. And job loss is a painful and humiliating thing to go through, and I can speak personally of this since I lost my job many years ago. I have no simple solution to offer, but I will just say three things:

1. We as Christian brothers and sisters must never look down on or despise those who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own. Paul’s dictum 2 Thess 3:10 “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” was written to those who refused to work, not to those who are unable to find work. Instead, we should be ready and willing to offer our support and our prayers for those in this situation.
2. In addition to looking for a new job, those who are unemployed can use their time in serving others or in learning new skills
3. There is no shame in taking advantage of whatever government aid is available. And in addition this church has a Fellowship Fund which is available to help meet the needs of BCFers who are in financial distress from job loss or other causes.

5. Conclusion

Our work is important to God, no matter how humble it may seem in man’s eyes. And yes, God is calling and gifting some to be missionaries and pastors and Bible teachers, but He is also calling and gifting others to be accountants and lawyers and plumbers and journalists and politicians and electricians and homemakers and engineers and artists. And since God has called you, you are ordained by God to that calling.

There is an old story set in the Middle Ages during the construction of one of the great European cathedrals. A nobleman was walking among the workers, asking about their labors.

The stonemason explained the care involved in raising a plumb wall. The glass worker pointed out the details of a leaded glass window. The carpenter spoke about the wooden frame which provided the support for the whole building.

Finally, the nobleman spotted a peasant woman with a broom and a bucket cleaning up the trash. He asked her what she was doing. She replied, “I’m building a cathedral for the glory of God!”

That is Paul’s teaching in a nutshell “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men”

This same idea was expressed poetically by the 16th century Anglican priest George Herbert:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in any thing,
To do it as for thee:

All may of thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with his tincture (for thy sake)
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold:
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for lesse be told.

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6. Application

We must learn not to work just to live, but to live to work for the glory of God.

Here are some applications provided by the pastor of New Life Fellowship:

- **Accountant**-- You count your numbers with care as if you're doing Jesus' tax returns.
- **Car salesperson** – You sell that car as if you're selling to Christ.
- **Construction manager**– It's Jesus' house you are building
- **Sanitation Worker**- You pick up all the garbage that fell out of the can because it's Jesus' street you're cleaning
- **Educator** –Jesus is one of your students! Christ is your Principal!
- **Dentist** – It is Jesus' teeth you are working on.
- **Hairdresser** – Work as if this were Christ's hair.
- **Musician** – You play to give Christ joy.
- **Counselor** – When that pain in neck patient arrives, remember it is Christ walking into the room.
- **Waiter** – You go the extra mile, not for tips primarily, but because Jesus is your customer
- **Student** - Studying for Christ. Doing the best you can, not out of anxiety, not for grades first – study to honor the Lord.

We will close by singing the familiar hymn “Take my life and let it be Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.” Because our work is such a large part of our lives, when we sing this hymn we are in effect consecrating our work to our Lord as well.