

Gods Purpose for Work

by Keith Hartsell

God's purpose for our work is to do meaningful work that brings forth good and produces goods, both for ourselves and for others.

Duration: 30:12

Scripture: Genesis 2:5, Matthew 6:33, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Ephesians 2:10, Colossians 3:23-24, 1 Peter 4:10-11, Revelation 21:22

Topics: "Work"

Description

The sermon series at the Church of the Redeemer is focused on faith-filled work. The speaker discusses the question of what people would do for work if money were no object, highlighting the importance of finding passion and purpose in our work. The sermon emphasizes that humans were created to do meaningful work, even in the age to come, and that work is a part of our sacramental relationship with God. The speaker references the biblical passage in Genesis where God forms humans from the ground to work the land, emphasizing the significance of our work in God's plan.

Transcript

I love it when we all get together. It also sounds great when we worship all together, because some of our congregations are small, and it can sound, it can be a little challenging for a worship leader to lead a group that's not singing very loud. But when we all gather together, when we bring the coals of the fire together, it feels really good, and my heart's really blessed, and I love seeing all of the folks that I know fairly well getting together and building on the relationships that we have.

Here at Northwestern, the Church of the Redeemer started up again last Sunday, and started a sermon series on faith-filled work. And so we're in the middle of that series, and so I'm bringing a word to you from the scriptures on God's purpose for our work, and the variety of work that we all have to do in our lives. And I've often been asked the question, it's one of those sort of icebreaker questions, if you could do anything for work and get paid to do it, anything in the world, anything that you can imagine, what would you spend your life doing if money were no object? It's a question that gets at the heart of your passion in life, and you can learn a lot about someone when you ask them the question, and you hear some of their responses.

Some of you might say, well, if I could read books all day long every year of my life, Danny would be absolutely and utterly thrilled. If he could just stay in a room and read all of the books on his bookshelf, or

on my bookshelf, he would be thrilled. Some of you might say, this is more personal to me, live on a beach island with no other people, or to travel.

If I could just travel for my life and get paid to do it, that's what I would do. Some of you would want to design things, or build things, or bake things for your life. I've even heard a few teenagers and some adults say, I would play video games all day long.

That's what I would do. That's the work I would love to do if I could do anything. So today, as we talk about the meaning of our work and God's design and his desire for us, it wasn't until my 30s that I heard one of the adults that I admired say this quote, we are created for meaningful work.

It's my main idea for this particular sermon. We were made for meaningful work. We actually aren't made for leisure, for vacation, for constant rest.

We were made to do something with our lives, and in fact, something with our eternal lives that is meaningful to the way that God made us, to the way that we're wired. We're actually made to do meaningful work in the eschaton, meaning in the age to come when all of heaven and earth are remade, and there's a new heaven and a new earth that's sort of symbolically represented by this heavenly Jerusalem that Revelation describes with a river of life and all these trees of life that have fruit for every month and leaves for the healing of the nations. There's this image of what it will look like when we all are gathered up around Jesus himself and we live the rest of eternity together, that we were made to do meaningful work in that age, not to lie around on clouds and pluck harps or whatever various images you might have in your head about what heaven might be like or what being with Jesus face to face will be like.

We'll actually give ourselves to meaningful things, and so those of you that love to design, you'll be able to design without the limitations of sin or the breaking down of your physical body or without envy of others' designs or competition. You'll be able to design without cost and without limit. Can you imagine being an architect in the heavenly Jerusalem and you can use any material in your construction? Can you imagine the kind of joy that architects and designers and builders will have to be able to build those things that are so beautiful and so glorious without limitation, without cost, without the danger of injury? I sometimes imagine what it would be like in heaven to be a chef or to be a musician.

I used to be the mission pastor at Church of the Resurrection, which is the cathedral church of our diocese out in Wheaton, Illinois. I was there for many years on staff and I worked closely. My actual close ministry friend was the worship pastor.

His name is Steve Williamson. He and I were about the same age. We had about the same size family and we didn't have any authority over the other on staff, and so we became great friends.

We weren't in charge of the other's annual review. We didn't have to correct each other. We just worked together and were completely equal in our positions on staff.

We had this running joke. I was the missions pastor. He was the worship pastor.

An artist even depicted worship and mission by painting these two sisters running through a field holding hands. The staff joked that Steve and I were the two sisters of worship and mission. He would say to me in some of those meetings as we would brainstorm, he would say to me that when we got to heaven that I would be out of a job, right? That's the hope, is that missions would be done when we get to heaven.

And so I would always retort, and you'll have to work for eternity because he's the worship pastor. So let's look at our passages in the bulletin. As we ask this question, what is God's purpose for our work? In Genesis, as God creates the earth and the ground and the garden, verse 5, let me pull out this passage for me to reference.

Verse 5 says, when no bush of the field was yet in the land, and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, to work the ground. God formed the human from the ground in order to work the ground. Sometimes, depending on what version you use, it'll say the word ground, it'll say the word earth, or it'll say the word dust, all having the same meaning.

He formed the human from the ground, which gives us this sacramental relationship. As Anglicans, we're very sacramental. We love that the things that God made matter to us and that they're not insignificant.

He forms the human from the ground, creating the sacramental relationship between the human and the earth, the human and the dirt, us and the dust. We say on Ash Wednesday, this phrase that's recorded in Genesis that God says to Adam, as after they have committed the sin of eating from the tree of life, he says that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. We say on Ash Wednesday, as we apply the ashes to our foreheads, remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Repent and believe the gospel. Now, we know that God made man and woman for relationship, that within God's presence are a relationship of three, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and there's this mutual exchange of sacrificial love, one person of the Trinity for the other. They have this divine community and this divine exchange of love.

God's love so overflowed even that relationship that his desire in the creation of man and woman was to invite us as sentient beings, as sentient creatures, to enter into that divine exchange of love, that our primary purpose in being created was for the relationship that God wanted us to have with himself. And in doing so, he didn't make us because he needed servants or because he wanted someone to clean creation after the parties or whatever that the angels and archangels threw. There wasn't a desire for servants or servanthood or slaves in God's creating of man and woman.

His desire for us was to create for us the goodness of having our hearts oriented towards him as well as oriented towards producing good, producing goods, producing good for ourselves and good for others. All you have to do is look at people who don't have meaningful work to see what humanity looks like when we have nothing meaningful to apply our gifts and our energy and our passions to, whether it's individuals who don't have a job and they're struggling without a source of income or there are people who are in jobs but there's no meaning in the work that they are doing. Because brothers and sisters, you and I know that a great many jobs in this world exist not for producing good but for gaining wealth or accumulating possessions.

That there's a lot of jobs that don't create good or bring greater good into people's lives and for anyone who's made in the image of God, there is this desire, this longing to do something that's purposeful with our work, with our time. Some fantasize about a lifelong relationship with leisure. There can be this hope that if I can just make as much money as possible, I can just sit around and do whatever I want, which often means not doing much.

Idleness, slothfulness, this apathy that humans can have when they don't have any meaning to give themselves to, anything meaningful in their work. So we think about and fantasize about becoming independently wealthy and going on vacations or sitting on beaches, sipping Mai Tais, which those are not bad things. Reading books are not bad things and the things that we want to give ourselves to in leisure are not bad but they're most enjoyed in the context of days of giving our lives to something meaningful and a producing good.

In verse 15, God took the man in Genesis and he put him in the garden of Eden and it says that he put in there to work it and to keep it, that this was Adam's meaningful work. And Eve also is created out of his body, out of the dust of the earth to be a partner in the meaningful work that God had given to Adam and Eve. And this is before sin enters the world.

This is when all the animals and the insects are under the authority of man and woman. So imagine where you can tend a garden, trimming the hedges and weeding without insect bites, without ticks and mosquitoes, without poison ivy creating rashes on your body. This is when all of creation is under the authority of man and woman before sin.

And mist rises from the ground to water everything so that there's no like complicated systems of irrigation to mediate the struggle with dry ground. Because every day the Lord God watered the earth. But when Adam and Eve disobey God's one restriction in the garden, God declares the consequence for them.

And for Adam he says this phrase. This is the consequence of your sin, Adam. Cursed is the ground because of you.

In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. And you shall eat the plants of the field by the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread till you return to the ground.

For out of it you were taken for you are dust and to dust you shall return. God declared that the very ground would be impacted by the consequences of his sin by Adam and Eve's disobedience that that their fall from God's grace and the Holy presence of God would result in all of the animals and the plants and the earth itself no longer subjecting themselves to human authority, making all of the work much more difficult, making it the word in here is pain, causing you to sweat, increasing your labor so that all of our labor becomes more fruitless, much more laborious. And we attempt things with our work and our labor that don't do any good.

And so we have to think of another way. I don't know if you had this problem with planting things in your garden only to discover that they die right away. There's this like waste of labor and work because of the consequences of our sin have soaked themselves into the very ground, into the very earth that we walk upon and our bodies then start to break down.

So before there wasn't the kind of soreness and arthritis and pain in the breaking down and the aging process of our bodies when it comes to work, there's no more drowsiness or difficulty staying awake. There's this incredible hindrance now because of the consequences of sin. He made us for the gradual process of becoming partakers in the divine nature with bodies that don't break down or get sick or die.

But now our bodies have become the hindrance to our meaningful work, getting painfully sore, getting sick, developing injuries until they cease to work anymore. The earth will no longer cooperate with mankind's efforts to tend gardens, to bring forth food, and our bodies will no longer cooperate. And now

there's a bringing forth of chaos in all of creation as a result of our sin.

And animals and insects fight with each other and they fight with mankind for scarcer food sources rather than living in the abundance that God created us for. So for us, we don't even have an image of labor, of meaningful work without sin. We don't even know what that's like.

And so for many of us, the idea of work, of vocation can have lots of negative components to it. Now in our sinfulness, many people resent working. They resent their work for a variety of reasons.

That's why I think we fantasize about eternal leisure because we've never experienced the kind of work that we were meant for. In our gospel passage, if you'll flip forward in your bulletin, you can see how the nature of work is distorted even for the Jews with regards to the Sabbath day. So this was a common conflict between the Jews and between Jesus.

The whole idea of taking a day of rest was because it was important for people to trust in God to provide, not in themselves, for everything that they received. We needed to reorient ourselves towards God's provision because we are sinners and we think it is up to us. And we forget that God has provided in the past and that he will provide now in the present.

So now we get lost as sinners in our work. We tend to overwork. Americans are described of all the people on the planet as the most overworking people in a culture with the least amount of off or rest days.

We tend to derive our identity and our self-worth from our work. And the Jews turn the spirit of the law around Sabbath and rest into a legalism, which was punishable by death. They made it punishable to work on the Sabbath by death.

But Jesus corrects their twisted views of the day of rest by declaring this phrase. It's in verse 17. He says, God is always working.

My father is working even now and I am working. And he was accused of breaking the law of working on the Sabbath by performing a miraculous healing of this man, which most of his Sabbath breaking crimes were about healing people, about helping or serving someone. And then he prophesies at the end of our passage here in verse 20, he says, and greater works than these will he show him, referring to the father, so that you may marvel.

The father will show the son greater works than these. In other words, Jesus is saying, I'm just getting started. I am just getting started.

Now, many of you might be in a season right now where you're trying to figure out what is the meaningful work that you've been made for. In fact, it's a common crisis for college students. And even now for most people in their entire decade of the twenties, trying to figure out and sort through what is the meaningful work that I made for.

And then you have midlife crises, right? For people at my age, right around 40 or early forties feeling like, man, I don't like anything that I've been doing for the last two decades. And we enter into a crisis of vocation, a crisis of work, a crisis of calling. For students, the question is, what should I be studying right now? What should I major in? And there could be a lot of stress and pressure around that question.

What kind of job should I be searching for connected to what I'm studying? Or what job do I want, which should help me determine what kind of degree I should get? We no longer live in a world where people get jobs and stay in those jobs for 50 years. We just no longer live in that kind of world. In fact, we have the highest turnover and field change than ever before in history.

I remember one of my first campus jobs at Wheaton College out in the western suburbs was the phone-a-thon. It's actually where I met my bride, who's working in the nursery. She was my boss.

I remember that as a part of this phone-a-thon job, we were to call alumni and ask them to give money to the college. And it was how they paid for scholarships and other kinds of programs. And so we would get this sheet of paper on each individual that we were calling that gave us the information around when they graduated, what their degree was in, what field of study they majored in, and then their current employment.

So you got to see all of these alums, what they studied and what they're currently doing as a job. And it was fascinating for me how many, I mean, it was a high percentage of people who are currently doing something that had absolutely nothing to do with what they studied, which was a relief for me because there was a lot of pressure around what do I study. And I just thought it doesn't seem to matter.

People don't get jobs based on what they study, by and large. And one of the most humorous ones that really drove home this symbolically to me was I saw this man on the sheet of paper that I was going to call who got a degree in sociology. And he married a woman from the college who got her degree in psychology.

And they both were making their living as horse breeders. Right? Both fields of study have to do with human behavior. And it's almost as if they gave up on humans.

Like, you know what? Horses are easier. Let's just deal with horses. I was just like, that is what I call irony.

Because so many alum work these jobs completely unrelated to their degrees. I felt like I could communicate to my fellow students, you know what? It really doesn't matter as much as you think. What you study, because you're going to get into a job and a vocation and hopefully the calling that God's laid out for you.

So study what excites you. Study what brings you life. It's important to know your passions and your gifts.

But it's not true to say you can do anything if you set your mind to it. That's not true. That's sort of an American phrase we say, I think, a lot to children, but it's not true.

You can't do anything you want if you put your mind to it. We have unique giftings. And I just cannot do what you are uniquely wired to do or vice versa.

So we have to discover the gifts that we have. We have to discover the way that we're wired and our passions. You and I are so uniquely different that we need each other, but we can't be each other.

You can't just practice your way into any field. And our fields of study and our degrees and our first few jobs that we get in college and out of college are immensely helpful in discovering what you're good at and what you're not good at, what you love and what you hate. I've met so many college students who came to me for an internship and said, I want to do anything in the church as internship except work with children

or except work with teenagers or except work with really old people in nursing homes.

And they have these ideas of what they don't want to do. But it's incredibly often where three months later, I have discovered that they've switched and they are now doing the thing they said they did not want to do. And that's their passion.

It's like there's a discovery process that we all need to go through by trying the different things out that we think we like only to discover maybe this isn't it. Maybe it's something else. So we need to accept that we don't necessarily know ourselves very well, but that we can grow to know ourselves better and discover what we love.

Right now, if you're a student, your meaningful work right now is to study, is to be a learner and to take in as much as you can during this season because you'll never have the same amount of time available to you as you do right now for reading and for study. Danny can attest to this. There just is not the same amount of time anymore.

You start to get involved in other things, other relationships, church commitments or marriage and family. Many of you are trying to discover what kind of job you should be searching for. What degree will best prepare you for your life's work in this world? I think that while you find your way into jobs that are not the perfect job for you, I think every single person has components to their job they don't love.

I think that's part of this life because it builds our character. Obviously, I tell everyone who comes to work for me in the church as an intern or as a missionary, I'm not going to ask you to do what the janitor doesn't want to do, but I'd love it if you had a heart that was willing to. I once was told when I was an intern that interns do what the janitor doesn't want to do.

That's where that phrase comes from. I just remember hating that description of internships. Interns don't do what the janitor doesn't want to do, but we want people in the church who have the character, who have the heart to say, I am willing to do it if it needs to be done.

So we need parts of our jobs that aren't necessarily what we love, and that even the top people in this world, the top CEOs, the top, the best in their fields, they all have components of their work that they don't love. If you hate your job, pray for a new job, but also pray that God will help you learn and acquire whatever skills this job was meant to teach you. Whatever job we're given, let's assume God provided the job, as imperfect as it may be for us, and that we're to do the best job that we can while we're in that particular field, seeking to be the best worker we can with the strongest work ethic.

I don't know where Ben is, but I'm supposed to give him the signal to get the children. That's my signal moment. I don't know if you've worked alongside someone who had poor work ethic, but there are a lot of folks in the professional field now that don't have great work ethic.

They are trying to skate by and do as little as possible while hopefully flying under the authority in order to just do as little as possible. They're repulsive to work with. You see Paul commending the Thessalonians in our letter, like, stay away from brothers who are idle.

Stay away from, this is my translation, people who have very poor work ethic, because they are really difficult to work with and to work around, and these are not the people we want to become. So the hope for all of us is that we're able to discover in this life the kind of work that we're made for, to find our way into jobs over our lifespan that get us closer and closer to our God-given purpose in life. But for those of you in

your 20s, that does not get arrived at in your 20s.

It just doesn't happen. So I want you to set your expectations well, that your lifespan is about getting closer and closer to the kind of work and vocation that God's called you to, which ideally, it will look more and more like your eternal vocation in the eschaton. That's our hope.

That's what we long for. Can you imagine yourself doing this work? If you have in your mind's eye the work that you're doing now or the work that you want to do, can you imagine doing that without sin, rolling up your sleeves alongside Jesus to do the work together? That's what we're made for, not for idleness or leisure or eternal vacation, but meaningful work that engages all of the parts and capacities of your soul. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that we were made to produce good. And I pray, Lord, for every student here in particular and for those that have not found their way into meaningful work. We pray, Lord, that you would pave the way, that you would shine your light on the path.

We pray, Lord, that you would guide each man and woman into the kind of work that you are providing for them that will produce not only greater good in this world, but also greater good in each one of us. We pray, Lord, that you would use our work to transform our souls, that you would produce greater character and virtue and work ethic in us as we set our eyes on you and try to follow you as best as we can in our work. We pray, Lord, that you would provide blessing, that you would provide commissioning, that you would provide anointing for men and women who are struggling in their work.

We pray, Lord, that you would bolster them in their faith. We pray, Lord, that you would provide by the provider for all that is needed with regards to money and a place to live and food and paying bills. Lord, would you open our hearts to receive all that you have for us.

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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