

NATURAL LAW

Genesis 3:17-19

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. 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."

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Mark 12:41-44

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."

MESSAGE:

God, the Creator of the universe, rules over all creation, but he rules through two different kingdoms. The two kingdoms exist side by side and there is no overlap. One is called the kingdom of this world, or nature, and God governs it through what is called natural law. Natural law has two parts: the laws of nature which we call scientific laws, and the moral law which is inscribed in the human heart. The other kingdom is called the Kingdom

of God, and God reigns in it through the Ten Commandments and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

God has revealed Himself to us through His attributes: He is all-powerful, all-knowing, omnipresent, just, merciful and eternal. But according to the Bible, God's most important attribute is His love. John wrote that "God IS love," and Paul wrote, "...three things abide: faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love." But God's love does not consist merely of feelings or emotions; God loves us in truth and actions.

If God had merely *felt* love for us, yet done nothing about it, we would still be in a pickle. But He showed his love by sending His Son to pay the penalty for our sins by taking our place on the cross. And God's love did not stop there. He continues to send His love into the world by urging and equipping us to serve each other in deeds of love. And he makes clear what He means by "deeds of love": things like feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, inviting in the stranger, clothing those who are naked, looking after the sick and visiting those in prison. In sum: *providing help to those who need help*. And God rewards such acts of lovingkindness *in both kingdoms*.

I have been often asked, "When non-believers do good deeds aren't they just as good as the good deeds done by believers?" And the answer is: "Of course they are. A good deed is a good deed, whoever does it." And God rewards good deeds whether they are done by believers or non-believers.

Now most of you know that I have lived what you might call a colorful life, a life which has included three different careers. These different careers have enabled me to get to know and to work with people in many different walks of life. I would like to tell you my experience has taught me about how God rewards deeds of love.

The first environment I worked in was a university classroom. I aspired to be a writer and to teach English literature. I spent eight years of college preparing for that career—and then abandoned it after two years.

The gap between what I expected and what I found was enormous. I had always envisioned academia as a place where intellectually gifted people were engaged in a search for truth. Where exciting new ideas abounded, conversation was always stimulating and the quest for knowledge went on continually. I couldn't imagine anything better than working in that kind of environment. What I found, however, was something very different.

In the five different universities with which I was associated--one as an undergraduate, two as a graduate student and two as a faculty member—what I encountered was cynicism rather than optimism, mutual suspiciousness rather than a spirit of teamwork, intellectual pride rather than humility, and atheism rather than faith. Neither God nor His love was anywhere apparent to me in the halls of academe. And the tragedy was that that mindset was being passed along to students.

That experience taught me that when God is excluded from people's thinking, and intellectual pride reigns supreme, the result isn't pretty. I wasn't a believer myself, but the term that occurred to me to describe my colleagues was "spiritual fatigue." I didn't want

to spend my life around spiritually fatigued people, so I left the world of academia and looked elsewhere for a career.

The next work environment I entered was radically different from academia: it was the world of industry. I worked for a year as a common laborer in a factory and then entered management as personnel manager. I had been drawn to the world of industry ever since I had been a kid. When I was in the sixth grade the principal of our grade school took us on a train trip to Kansas City. I had never been outside of Joplin, Missouri, or seen a building taller than six stories, and the skyscrapers of Kansas City were to me like Oz was to Dorothy. For me that day was like a magical mystery tour: we visited an art gallery, a zoo, a high school and a Ford Assembly plant.

Most of my friends liked the zoo the best, but I was bewitched by the assembly plant. We saw a car being assembled before our very eyes. The machinery, the noise, the assembly line, the workers--they all fascinated me and that day I fell in love with factories. So when I left academia and entered the world of industry, it was like coming home.

I became the personnel manager of a factory in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and I loved it. The bulk of my job was dealing with workers out in the shop; a personnel manager serves as a link between the factory workforce and management. My Dad was a dentist and a large part of his practice consisted of blue-collar workers: plumbers and pipefitters and carpenters and electricians and miners and factory workers. He called them "salt of the earth" and spoke of them with respect.

So like many a son before, I inherited my father's high regard for laborers and I spent a lot of time on the shop floor talking with them, listening to their complaints and doing what I could to resolve them. I was impressed that they told you exactly what they thought in terms that were crystal clear and they gave it to you right between the eyes. It wasn't always fun to hear, but you knew exactly where you stood with them. I came to respect them as much my father had.

There was, however, a dark side to factory labor. It is hard, thankless work and it takes a toll on the human body. The work is repetitious, boring and endless. You spend your life in a three square foot work space—eight or ten hours a day, five or six days a week, and nothing ever changes. You are a cog in a giant machine that never stops running. If you work on an assembly line, the line never stops. If you work on a punch press, when you finish putting a bin of steel plates through the press, there is Homer Shultz on his towmotor waiting behind you with another bin full of steel plates. And to add to it all, you know that if they can ever replace you with a machine, they'll do it in a second, so there goes your job security.

A pop culture journalist by the name of Stud's Terkel once put together a book entitled *Working*. It consisted of interviews with people from all walks of life—from janitors to CEO's. The people who hated their jobs the most were people who worked in factories and steel mills. It's a hard way to make a living. I loved the time I spent in factories but I was troubled by the effects they had on those who worked in them.

When I left the industrial world, the next workplace I entered stood in stark contrast to a factory environment. I was hired as head of employee relations for University Hospitals here in Cleveland.

In the time I spent at UH I learned something I'll never forget. First of all, I learned that health care workers at all levels are highly motivated people who are very dedicated to the work they do. They are, by and large, the least money-driven people I've ever known (except, maybe, for pastors!). And I'm talking about all health care workers: nurses, lab technicians, pharmacists, administrators, accountants, janitors, those who work in the laundry—everyone except the doctors who live in a world of their own.

All of them—at least all of the people who worked at UH—had one thing in common: *they believed in what they were doing—that each one of them in his or her own way was helping to heal the sick, alleviate pain and suffering, and save lives.* And every one of them was absolutely right.

Hospitals are unique organizations: they are far more complex than industrial companies, for instance. An industrial company basically has four departments: production, sales, marketing and accounting. (Off to the side there is employee relations which they all consider a pain in the posterior.) A hospital, on the other hand, has many, many departments, each one of which has a unique function and all of which have to work together to insure that patients get the care they need. And while in an industrial company, there is usually some bickering and finger-pointing going on between departments, in a hospital there is next to none. The reason? They all have the patient's interest at heart.

Whatever an employee's religious convictions are, he is serving another person by what he does. And God rewards deeds of love by blessing the hearts of those who do them. The result is that even though healthcare workers are poorly paid (except for doctors who live in a world of their own)—they find their work fulfilling.

I used to marvel that when I walked the floors of University Hospital, I could always draw smiles from the employees I encountered. The janitor at UH who was being paid \$7.50 an hour would smile and say "Good morning!" while the face of a factory worker who was making \$17.50 an hour rarely wore a smile. And the academicians I had known only smiled when they looked in the mirror.

My fourth career, as you all know, was the ministry. And all I need tell you about that career is that it has been a labor of love from the day I entered the seminary to standing here today in the pulpit.

Does all this mean that one kind of work is superior to another in God's eyes? Not at all. All work has dignity and honor in God's eyes. As Luther wrote: "The plowboy on his way to the field in the morning with a hymn on his lips serves the Lord as well as Martin Luther." Only the refusal to work is judged unworthy. But we do live in a fallen world where we earn our bread by the sweat of our brow and whatever work we do is bound to include problems of one kind or another. As the saying goes, "That's why they call it work." But different kinds of work also bring different kinds of blessings.

I've been asked if I think that there will be work to do in heaven. I've usually said that I hope so, because sitting on a cloud and playing a harp for eternity doesn't sound like much fun. Actually, I'm inclined to think that there will be work to do in heaven. There was work to do in Eden before the fall, and heaven is described in the Bible as a new Eden. Hosea says that in paradise the fields will be so fertile that the one who spreads seed will be overtaken by the one who harvests the wheat.

Whatever the case, in this fallen world, we are called to work, and as we work, God works in us to teach us His love. For the one who works to help preserve the life and health of his neighbor, there is joy in the work he does. For the one whose work is unrewarding, God gives him joy in putting his wages to work for his family and his neighbor.

God is constantly trying to teach us that loving other people in truth and action will always bear the fruit of peace and joy in the heart of the worker. And so these three things abide: faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.

Amen.