

## The Farmer and The Preacher

**Colossians 3:23-24: "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."**

There was a farmer who was very proud of his farm. He farmed six hundred acres of land: two hundred and fifty acres of corn, two hundred and fifty acres of soybeans, some pigs and poultry and a hundred acres of pasture for dairy cattle. Like all other farmers he was up before sunrise to milk the cows. He spent the rest of the day tending to his other animals, maintaining his equipment and working in the soil. Then at sundown, the cows had to be milked again.

It was a hard, relentless job but he was proud of his farm and didn't mind putting all of his work into it. His church had just acquired a new pastor who was making it a point to visit each member of the church so that he could get to know them. When the pastor came to visit the farmer, the farmer very proudly showed him around his farm. When the pastor saw the two hundred and fifty acres of corn, he shook his head in wonder and said, "Isn't it marvelous what God and man can do when they work together?" When he saw the two hundred and fifty acres of soybeans, he said it again, "isn't it wonderful what God and man can do when they work together?" When he saw the dairy cattle grazing in the pasture, he said the same thing. By this time the farmer was getting irritated, so he said, "that's true, pastor, but you should have seen this farm when the Lord worked it by himself."

This joke illustrates something that Martin Luther once said: "man's constant mistake is that he thinks he is doing something by himself." Nowhere does that have a better application than it does to the work we do to make a living. A journalist by the name of Studs Terkel once put together a book entitled *working*. He asked one hundred people from all walks of life what they did for a living and how they felt about their jobs. Their opinions were all over the map: some loved their jobs, some hated them and most were somewhere in between. Work can be a blessing or a curse, depending on whether we do it only by ourselves or bring god into the equation.

To begin with, work itself has two radically different aspects. In the first place work is the reason the Bible gives for why God created man. The first thing God did with Adam was to put him to work in the garden. *Genesis 2:15*: 'god took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.' Like everything else in Eden, work was a blessing. But sin entered the world and work fell under a curse. Work became toil. *Genesis 3:19*: "by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground."

So to the question, “is work a blessing or a curse?” The answer is, it can be either. By itself it can be a curse. With God, it can be a blessing. It all depends on the worker.

But before we start talking about the work that men do, let’s talk about the work that is done by the one whose image we bear, because God works too. *John 5:17*: Jesus said, “My father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.” God does two kinds of work: the work of creation and the work of salvation. His work of creation is described in the first two chapters of *Genesis*, where we are told that in six days, God created the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God works “to this very day” to sustain his creation. Now God has left evidence of his work throughout his creation. In *Psalms 18* we read, “the heavens are telling the glory of God and the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” Of course if you’re an atheist you have to believe that the heavens and the earth somehow created themselves. The fact that this is illogical and makes no empirical sense doesn’t bother them. Paul calls them “fools” because they deny the truth against better knowledge—knowledge that is readily available to them through their powers of observation and reason. *Romans 1:19-20*: “...what may be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” A poet once wrote, “the world is charged with the grandeur of God.” Creation abounds with evidence of its creator.

In his work of salvation--God works in human hearts and minds to save mankind from death and hell. That work began at the cross and continues to this very day. God does both kinds of work—his creative and his redemptive work—through his son, Jesus Christ. This is important to understand because we normally associate Jesus only with the work of salvation, and not with the work of creation. But Jesus is both the ΛΟΓΟΣ, the Word, the Pre-Incarnate Son of God whom God brought forth as the first of his works, and he is also the incarnate Son of Man who took on human form at Bethlehem. In *Proverbs*, Jesus is called, “the craftsman at God’s side through whom the seas were set in place and the mountains were raised up.” Isaiah calls him the suffering servant of God who was “pierced for our transgressions,” and “crushed for our iniquities,” In the Gospels he is called, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” And so Jesus is both the author of creation and the Savior of mankind. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

How then in light of this, shall we view the work that man does? Well, we can view in it two very different ways: one, as work we do by ourselves, or, two, as work which is done with God in mind.

If we labor by ourselves, sooner or later the work we do will become a curse. Whatever promise it initially holds out, in the end it will bring disillusionment. Why? Because whether we are self-employed or work for an organization, in the final analysis we are working for others. The farmer may think he works by himself, but in reality he works for others: for the bank that holds the mortgage on his land and lends him the money to buy seed and feed for his animals and to procure his equipment. He works for the who sets the price for his grain and the dairy owner who buys his milk. In the end, he works for others—like we all do. And when we're dealing with others we're dealing with sinners like ourselves, and the curse of sin falls upon our dealings. The man who goes to work for a company is saddled with the same problem. It doesn't necessarily seem this way to him when he first goes to work. He is young and full of enthusiasm and the sky seems to be the limit. Whether he's selling credit cards in Brooklyn or shoveling you-know-what in Louisiana, success lies ahead and he goes to work in the morning with a song in his heart. All he asks is for a fair reward system because he's sure that he can out-work, out-compete, out-think and out-perform all the other employees. Promotion is his idol. But then—time happens. His enthusiasm wanes, his ambition wears down, he becomes cynical. He ends up being peter-principled into jobs he worries about keeping and his work life becomes a matter of “just showing up” and getting through the day. Then all he can do is transfer his ambitions to his children. Remember an old TV show called “The Honeymooners” where art carney played a guy named Ed Norton who worked in the sewer? One day Ed finds that his wife is pregnant and immediately starts planning his future son's life. “I'll send him to the best schools in NYC. He'll get a scholarship to Harvard. Then he'll get a PhD. From Yale, then he'll become a “road” scholar. Then I'll get him a job in the sewer.” Such is the stuff that dreams are made of. The reality is that when we work by ourselves and for ourselves, work is just another sinful human endeavor with a curse waiting somewhere along the way. “by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground.” Apart from God, work is best described by Henry David Thoreau, who wrote: “most men live lives of quiet desperation.”

But there is another path one can take, and that is the path of inviting God into your work. I don't mean evangelizing your fellow employees, although that's a wonderful thing to do if your employer allows it and you have the courage to do it. I mean thanking God for giving you your vocation—whatever it may be—and asking him hour by hour and day by day to help you do it cheerfully. This was one of the pillars of Luther's theology: that God calls all men to a vocation, to “work in the garden” in one way or another. And God is not as much interested in the nature of the work a man does as he is in the spirit with which the man does his work. He is as pleased with the work of a man who mops the floor at McDonalds as he is with the work of the best doctor or teacher or Pastor in town. Luther once said that a plowboy on his way to the field in the morning with a hymn on his lips served the Lord as well as Martin Luther.

We are to be salt and light in the world and part of being salt and light is being gainfully employed. Our sermon text says it all: remember that you are serving the Lord Christ by doing the best job you can of the job you have—and doing it with a cheerful spirit. In God's eyes, that's just as good of a work as contributing fifty million dollars to build a hospital.

This too is important to understand because sometimes Christians get the idea that the work they do is of no consequence compared to the work of Christians who do extraordinary things—like Mother Theresa of Calcutta. This is not true. Being a “good Christian” is working cheerfully for your bread, taking care of your family, raising your children in the nurture and admonition of the lord, and trusting Jesus Christ for your salvation. That is “redeemed work”—work done under the cross of Jesus Christ--and to the glory of Jesus Christ. If we dedicate our work, our jobs and our careers to gaining wealth, status, admiration, security—in the end we will find only disillusionment. Even the most successful man who becomes the CEO of a company—will retire one day and find that he is just another Joe Schmo on the bus and nobody laughs at his jokes anymore. But if we dedicate our work to God and invite him to help us with it each and every day, he will give us a foretaste of what work will be like in heaven. The prophet Amos speaks of what that will be like: “the days are coming, declares the Lord, when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit.” (Amos 9:13)

Happy Labor Day! Amen.