

Good Work: The Gift of Work

May 1, 2016

Genesis 1:26-28

This morning we begin a new sermon series called 'Good Work'
And we're exploring what the Bible has to say about
All of the ways that we occupy ourselves

Sometimes, that's sitting in an office or a classroom (as a teacher/student)
Or working with our hands in a shop
Or chasing kids around the house or chauffeuring them around town
Or volunteering and helping people
Or maybe you have a day job, but you have a passion
Outside of your occupation—photography, cooking, music, fashion

In this series we are exploring all of those things that occupy us
That in one way or another we could call "work"

This is an important topic for us to explore
Because the majority of us
Spend the majority of our time somewhere other than the church

And we would remiss if we thought that Scripture didn't have anything to say
About the way that the majority of us spend the majority of our time

I've had a number of different jobs over the years
Worked for a catering company in MS/HS
Helped build fences; been a lifeguard, camp counselor
Mowed lawns; installed flower beds; valet parked
Sold office supplies in a retail store
Led worship at different churches; served as a missionary; now I'm a pastor

One of recurring conversations I've had as a pastor
As I'm getting to know someone in the church
And asking about their job—whatever occupies them
I often hear people offer some kind of apologetic explanation

For their work – as if it's not spiritual enough

“Yeah, I'm an accountant, but you know, I volunteer as much as I can”

I'm thrilled they're volunteering—and that it's meaningful for them

But there seems to be this kind of underlying embarrassment

Or insecurity on their part as if they think I don't value/respect their work

Because it's not “spiritual” enough

And that's an absolute shame

This divide—in many people's minds—between

What's spiritual and what's worldly

Or what's sacred and what's secular is unhelpful & frankly, untrue

B/c doesn't Psalm 24 say “The earth is the Lord's & ALL that's in it?”

If God wanted to create a truly “spiritual” world that didn't need

Accountants, teachers, mechanics, farmers, nurses, parents, etc.

He would have, but he didn't

We have to reject the notion that overtly “spiritual” work

Is at the top of the pyramid

And anything else is less than, or just a necessary evil

Or “just a job,” or just a way to pay the bills

We need to develop a Christian imagination for work, vocation, calling

And all of the ways we can order/ beautify/create/shape God's world

This morning, we will read from Genesis 1 (please keep your Bibles open)

As we read, we're going to find that “work” was a good part of God's creation

Part of the plan from the very beginning

Flowing out of our identity as people made in God's image:

Genesis 1:26-28

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

The passage we've just read comes at the tail end of the creation account
We read this together on the first Sunday of Advent last year
As we looked at the names of God

Genesis 1 starts out with a description of the blank canvas of creation
It was "formless, empty and dark"
An important line, b/c it serves as the "antithesis" for the whole chapter

God's plan is not a formless, empty, dark world
But one that is formed (orderly), full and filled with light
So that is precisely what God sets out to do

On day 1, God speaks light into existence
On day 2, God begins to form and shape that which is formless
On day 3, God continues the work
And causes land to emerge from the sea
And dry ground appears

Then the ground produces vegetation and trees of diverse kinds
Each bearing seeds so that they could reproduce
God forms the land and puts within it a self-perpetuating form of life
Because God wanted a world that was formed and full of life

On day 4, God continues his work of illuminating creation
With the invention of sun, moon and stars
At all times, the world was to be illuminated
Because God wanted a world that was filled with light

On day 5, God fills the skies and the seas
With living creatures of a variety of kinds
Notably, God blesses the creatures & commands them to multiply
God's blessing is tied to the creation of more and more diverse life
Because God wanted a world that was full of life

On day 6, God created more living creatures of a variety of kinds
Livestock, creatures that move on the ground (reptiles, etc.) + wild animals

At the end of day 6, at the pinnacle of his creation, God creates humanity

I want you to notice a shift in the language:

On days 1-5 and the first part of day 6

God says some version of “Let there be... let the land...” (passive/permissive)

But at the creation of humanity, the language changes to “Let us make...”

A first person plural, active, inviting voice

We get the picture of all of God’s heavenly court on the edge of their seat

Angels and celestial beings

And God’s very self, Triune in nature as Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Fully engrossed and invested in the unique divine act about to happen

To have mustered the attention/creative energy of the entire heavenly court

Suggests that what is now being created is of exceptional worth

Standing distinct in both its being and its function

Relative to all other things God has made

This point is further demonstrated by the repetitive descriptions that follow:

Mankind made “in our image, in our likeness...”

Genesis 1 belabors the point that people are image bearers of God

That’s now very churchy language, but what does that mean?

The language about being made in God’s image is not unique to the Bible

Look at writings in the ANE—Mesopotamia & Egypt (1000 yrs ago)

What we see is the language of a person being in the image/likeness of a god

Is reserved for royalty—monarchs, kings, rulers

So, we have written records of one king

Described as “the very image of Bel,” an ANE god

Another says: ‘The king is the very image of Shamash’

Another: 'Oh King of the inhabited world, you are the image of Marduk'
King Tut, in Egypt, that many remember- his full name Tutankhamen
Means "living image of the God Amun"

The language of being "in the image of..." is essentially regal language
But what stands out in Gen 1 is that the language is not limited to 1 person
A king, a person of particular importance
Instead, the title has been democratized
It's applied to all of humanity
All human beings—as one scholar said—
"Bear the stamp of royalty"

So, to say that humans were created in the image of God
Is to say that humans are the living symbols
Of the presence of God on the earth; the king over all creation
We are not divine, but by our very nature as imagebearers
We are symbols to one another
And to one creation itself of the existence and presence of God

To be an imagebearer is to be of sacred worth
Not because of anything we've done
But because of the One whose image we bear
We're going to talk about what on earth this means for work in just a sec

But if I may, I want to follow a rabbit trail for just a moment:

It's b/c we're made in the image of God
That Scripture commands us to treat all of humanity w/dignity
B/c violence, abuse, injustice are assaults on imagebearers
Assaulting an ambassador of a king is akin to an assault on the king himself
Likewise, violence against other people is taken as violence against God
And against one's very soul
And the taking of another life is particularly grievous to God
B/c to take another life is to pervert *our* imagebearing identity
And to discard the imagebearing identity of another

It's for this reason that all the time— & especially in an election year—

That Christians should be vigilant to protect & honor all human life

We should be courageous and unapologetic in our opposition
Against any politician or any political agenda
That is flippant with regard to human life
The lives of the unborn, the aged, the sick, the criminal
And even the national enemy

We don't get to decide who is and who isn't made in God's image
To be human is to be an imagebearer
And anyone who would try to make less of the life of another
Perverts and pollutes God's design and valuation of human life

I'm here to tell you this morning
No matter who you are; what you've done; what you've been through
You matter; you bear the image of God
You are cherished and precious and valuable in God's eyes
And you didn't do anything to earn that; it's just who you are.
Because we understand what it means to be an imagebearer
We can't help but see ourselves and one another in a new way

So now—back to the topic of work
What does being made in God's image have to do with work?
In looking at Genesis 1, we see we've been given a task

Look at all the verbs used in v. 28
Be fruitful, increase, fill the earth
This command is not unique; God gives the same to the animals
Remember that God design was a world that was brimming w/life
And so he commands us to multiply

But then God gives humanity a unique task, one he doesn't share w/others:
To subdue and rule over creation

As those who bear the stamp of royalty
And who represent to the created world the presence of its Creator

We are called to steward and to shape and to cultivate
And exercise dominion over all that God has made

This command, at its essence, is the origin of work, of the human vocation
And this, too, was a good part of God's plan
Not an after-thought or a survival technique after the Fall
To work, to cultivate, to multiply, to steward, to subdue
Is part and parcel of being one made in God's image

But if work is something central to our DNA/purpose
Then why don't Christians spend more time/energy
Thinking about stewarding our work as part of our Xian discipleship?

Unfortunately, we often have a measly imagination for thinking about work
And how that relates to walk with God

In his book, *The Gospel Goes to Work*, Stephen Graves [**book image**]
Argues that followers of Jesus should be thinking about work
At at least two levels
The Baseline and the Blue Sky

Baseline refers to the basic rules for engagement when Xians think about work
We should work hard, work with integrity, striving to be a good witness
And we should make sure that our work is just—that it honors God,
Honors people and honors God's creation
That's foundational in thinking about any aspect of our lives as Xians

This is **Colossians 3:23** thinking:

**“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord,
not for human masters”** (baseline)

But the concept of blue sky refers to the endless, creative expressions
Of those baseline commands and standards
And this is where we really to start to dream as Christians

A couple great examples:

On the east coast, Don Pool who owns a huge chain of car dealerships
And about 20 years ago, he commissioned a study
To see what people were paying for cars

He found that white men were paying the least

And African-American women were paying the most

The system of negotiation was set up in an unjust way

As a Xian, Don believed that God is a God of justice and order

And so he made a change (lost salespeople, changed the market)

Or there's Sarah Dubbeldam, who started Darling Magazine

Knowing that the magazine industry has serially objectified women

Sarah resolved to never retouch images of women in her magazine

& always feature content that reinforces the values/virtues of womanhood

They're taking a common medium & turning it on its head

Or there's friend of mine who runs a publicly traded company in the northeast

When he realized that one of his company's products

Was ultimately exploiting the poor, he insisted to his board

That they discontinue the product, even though it was profitable

Mike gave all of his reasons, but when the board kept pushing back

Mike said to them, "Listen, we can't do this anymore b/c it's wrong."

And then, as he was telling me this story of what had happened

He said: "We need a capitalism that is constrained by the Gospel."

His point: We need Xians in the world to look at every aspect of their work

And ask, "Does this align w/the values/order of God's kingdom

And if not, what can we creatively do about it?

Mike told me his goal is to re-inject TRUST back into the marketplace

[Pause: Don't we want people in every industry w/these kind of goals?]

Or there's the mortgage broker

Who has admonished her staff to be vigilant in not loaning

People more money than they can realistically handle

Why? Because she knew that financial stress is the leading cause of divorce

And these lenders were in some way responsible

For setting up families for marital success and longevity

Being a car dealer, or a journalist or a CEO or a lender

Are not inherently “spiritual” jobs and I am so grateful for that

The world deeply needs Christians to embrace work as a vital expression of our imagebearing identity.

The world would be more just, more orderly, more peaceful, more safe

If Christians began to develop an insatiable curiosity

For how to live out our God-given giftedness and calling

In our various vocations

And if we all had that kind of creative ambition, don't you think we'd all be so much more satisfied in our work?

It's good for us to be honest, hard working, dependable workers

It's good for our co-workers to know we are Xians

And even better if we can have conversations w/them about how Jesus has changed our lives. (This is the baseline)

But what if we took it a step further?

What if we took a hard look at our work & our industry & asked:

- How can this work bring glory to God and help order God's world?
- How can I be a part of redeeming this work, this industry so that it points others to the Lordship of Jesus?
- How can I use my influence to invite others in my workplace and industry into a new way of doing this work—both Christians and non-Christians alike—and in doing so, to point others to the Creator and the truth of our identity as bearers of God's image?

We have the perfect model for this endeavor in the person of Jesus

Who was the ultimate and perfect imagebearer

Who constrained Himself for us and for our salvation

That God's image within us—though tarnished by sin—

Might be renewed and reformed

And that we might express that imagebearing identity

In every aspect of our lives

As we gather around the Table, we come w/open hands & open hearts

Asking him to put us back together again so we can join him in his work