



AN UNEMPLOYED CHRISTIAN LOOKS AT WORK

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Introduction

I need to say, first of all, that the title of this message, "An Unemployed Christian Looks at Work," is misleading. I am no longer unemployed. It would be most accurate to say that I am under-employed. However, when I volunteered to do this teaching, I was unemployed. Perhaps more importantly, most of what the Lord has been teaching me about "work" has been during my months of un- and under-employment. So, the title stays.

Last week, John Hanneman taught on the subject of work. Among other things, he gave us some very helpful general background on the nature and purpose of work, so I am only going to spend a few moments going through what could be called the "theology of work." After that, I want to reflect on some important passages about work, and then tell you something of my own recent journey.

Biblical Backgrounds

There is a clear biblical framework for understanding work: when we work, we act in the image of God, who worked (i.e. created), and then rested from work. In this way the rhythm of work was created: first there is the beauty and joy of "making and doing," and then a period of resting in satisfied realization of the goodness of what has been made or done; work and rest: a rhythm whose joy would have been the unbroken lot of mankind if Adam had not sinned and brought down the curse that has caused our working lives to be filled with so many tensions. Now, the curse will eventually be redeemed.¹ Indeed all of creation groans for this redemption, for the day when the sons of man will be revealed in glory and the initial work of God's creation will enter into a new and glorious phase. In the meantime, however, we are compelled and commanded to work. We are even commanded to not support those who are able but refuse to work: "If anyone will not work, let him not eat."²

1 Thessalonians tells us:

But we urge you, beloved...to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.³

In other words, work is, for us, as we wait along with all of creation for the glory of redemption, a means of providing for our basic needs. We are not to be a bur-

den on others, and are to live quietly. Along with this, consider

1 Timothy 5:8:

And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

The picture is clear: In a practical sense, work exists as the means for us to provide for ourselves and our families. Spiritually, we work because we are created in the image of God.⁴

That's an overview of the biblical framework of work. Not surprisingly, though, scripture offers much more than just a general framework. In fact, the Bible is loaded with insights about work. My problem as I was preparing for this morning was trying to choose from among all the wonderful things I was finding.

I had never noticed before how many of Jesus' parables deal with the workday life of Roman Palestine: farm laborers and their wages, merchants buying and selling, builders of varying skill levels being compared, oil and wine production, etc. The motivation and attitude one brings to one's work is mentioned by Jesus. He even talks about how people get jealous and upset when wages seem unfair. When he taught, he profoundly entered into the working world and its mentality. His teaching had an authoritative ring which the professional rabbis apparently lacked. Perhaps some of this was due to the fact that Jesus could share with his audience from his own experience as a "working man," a carpenter who had worked for years and years with his own hands.

I also was amazed and humbled by the profound and disturbing insights on work from the Book of Ecclesiastes.⁵ Many passages from this book spoke directly to my heart, for I have felt the vanity of work, and know something of the apparent bitterness and weariness of soul which Solomon discerned as he looked out on the world, its work, and the vanity which exists "under the sun." Another very rich source in God's word regarding work is Proverbs. There are scores of proverbs that speak to our working lives. I've chosen just a few to mention this morning. While I read some of them, why don't you close your eyes and really try to listen. Clear your mind from distractions, and receive the wisdom of God:

Proverbs 14:23 - In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to want.

Proverbs 18:9 - He who is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys.

Proverbs 22:29 - Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings; He will not stand before obscure men.

Proverbs 23:4 - Do not toil to acquire wealth; be wise enough to desist.

First, a word of clarification. I believe that God gives wealth to some people. Wealth and poverty, just like every other condition in life, are not deviations from or mistakes in God's sovereign plan. Proverbs 23:4 (Do not toil to acquire wealth; be wise enough to desist) is not saying that there is some magical amount of money we ought to desire and then, when we reach it, we need to stop, because to go beyond it would be to "toil to acquire wealth." Rather, Proverbs 23:4 is parallel in meaning to Psalm 127:2:

It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.

The proverb reminds us that devoting ourselves to obtaining wealth is to change work into an idol; instead of being something beautiful, driven by the image of God, it becomes a compulsion for self-sufficiency, a caving in to the lie that men and women can find security in wealth and what wealth provides.

Also, I have to share a little about a tension that I have felt very strongly in my years of working. One of the most appalling things that I have seen in my career is the flagrant abuse that employees perpetrate on the companies they work for: hours of personal and idle chatter on long distance phone calls made on office phones, theft of supplies, petty arguments and jealousies that take up hours of time and radically decrease company effectiveness. And that's only the obvious stuff.⁶

Sometimes the situations are more subtle. Let me go back to something that John Hanneman taught us last week. When we are at work, we are there to serve our employer, because, as John said, the Lord Jesus Christ stands behind that employer.

If we are talkers or slackers at work, to use the terms given in Proverbs, we are inviting destruction for ourselves and those around us. This is true whether the talk or slacking is "spiritual" or not. If I take time to pray with someone at work, or take time to enter into someone's life, I need to remember where I am and whom I am serving. If I am engaging in activity that my employer is not compensating me for, then I need to make sure that I am not failing in my service to my employer—even if I think the behavior is to the benefit of God's kingdom. In addition, there are seasons in life to which we must pay attention. Does a father of several young children, with a wife struggling at home to do her best to raise the children, have the time for a long lunch of socializing or evangelism, or for going out for a

drink with colleagues from the office after work? Our commitment to our families is a higher calling than our commitment to our jobs. Our commitment to our jobs is a higher calling than our calling to our so-called "ministries." But our highest commitment is to the Lord; and we are to work, as unto him, with integrity and honor.

I would also like to explore the significance of Proverbs 22:9: "Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings; He will not stand before obscure men." Do you know someone who is really skilled at what he or she does?⁷ In my own work experience, the person who immediately comes to my mind is Mario. He co-founded a software company that I worked at for over eight years. Mario was a true renaissance man. But he had one over-riding passion, and the company that he co-founded was built on that passion: using computers to help children learn. For many people, he was difficult to work with. That was largely because of his intense focus on his passion—making computers help kids. "How can we do this better?" he was always challenging us: "What is your contribution to this task?" He built a math software product that has helped thousands of children, especially those who have fallen behind their peers, succeed. In fact, the company's success was really based on that one product. Despite the fact that he was so intensely focused, whenever I got discouraged at work, Mario was the one I went to. I would sit out in the courtyard with him and he would help me return my focus to why our company existed. I can still hear him: "Our contribution to education is making learning scientific." He never deviated from this. As far as I know, Mario was a thorough-going pagan. I loved him. Even though he was rough around the edges, and I can't commend him for his disregard of the emotional needs of some of his co-workers, I loved him. He died last April. Work commitments prevented me from attending his funeral.

In a figurative sense, then, Mario stood before kings. I think that Proverbs 22:9 is saying that true quality in work will ultimately be recognized and, sometimes, rewarded. Will the recognition bring money or fame? Is quality work the only thing that matters? Probably not. But that's not the point. The point is, and here the Word of God speaks directly to those of us who work: Do good work. When you put your hand to a task, do it with loving devotion, as unto the Lord. Quality work is a little reflection of the glory of God in creation. When we do something well, we are like our Maker, and when that happens, we sparkle. Kings will see the sparks!

Summary of the Biblical Texts on Work

To summarize these biblical texts then: I am made in the image of God. As one who reflects, however dimly, the image of God, I am compelled to work, to express with my body the creative capacities of doing and making that are part of God's image in me. In addition, I am commanded to work, and to work hard and to work well. I am commanded to provide for my family so that

they are without need. I am commanded by the Lord to use my material resources for helping those with less than I have, to be mindful every day of the poor and the heartbroken. As I submit to God's plan and design to work, God gives me the grace of a quiet life, and allows me to be a place of gift, rest, and hospitality for others. In short, I am to work because it is "who I am" to work. And as I work, I provide a channel that God uses to advance his kingdom in this broken and cursed world.

But what does my current experience look like? I am under-employed. I was completely unemployed for four months. I was trying to find work and failing every day. I was on my knees before the Lord, asking him to help me. I kept looking for him to answer me in terms that I understood: a job, income, security. But I think the Lord had something else to teach me, and I would like to spend the remainder of the time this morning sharing with you some of that.

A Date with God's Word

Recently I have been blessed by a prayer book put together by a community of believers in Northumbria (in northern England).⁸ While there are many things about the book that I like, most helpful to me are the daily scripture readings provided for meditation and prayer. Great care has been used in the selection of these readings. One day when things were very confusing for me spiritually and emotionally, when I was in a dark place of insecurity and faithlessness with respect to trying to find a job, God used his word in that prayer book to speak directly to my heart. The date was March 4.⁹ Let me describe what I learned that morning as I prayed and meditated my way through the word:

As always, the daily readings begin with something from the Psalms. The selection for March 4 was

Psalm 119:27-28:

**Make me understand the way of your precepts,
and I will meditate on your wondrous works.**

As I translated¹⁰ the first verse, I was thinking, "Yes, Lord, this is what I want. Open my understanding to your teachings, to the way they are put together, the way they create life. I long to meditate on your wonderful deeds—especially when they are wonders that you are performing...on my behalf!" But then came the next verse:

My soul melts away for sorrow...

"What is this, Lord?" I asked. "Do you mean, even as I struggle through another day of darkness and worry, that even meditating on your wondrous works will still leave me in sorrow and grief?" I felt a little more settled with the ending of verse 28, "... strengthen me according to your word," as it left me pleading with God, pleading for strength from his word. But I was still troubled. What might this kind of strengthening mean? "I need a job, Lord," I cried. "I don't want *the strength* to have a job. I have that. I want the job itself." If I was perfectly honest, I would have said, "Lord, I want a

paycheck. In fact, I just want money. I don't care where it comes from. Give me money, because that will provide for my family." Even as I recall the moment, I am ashamed. I was pleading with God that he step aside and let me worship mammon. If ever there was an appropriate time for lightning bolts, it was right then. But God is merciful, and I wasn't done with the day's readings.

Next was Proverbs 15:16:

Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble with it.

Now, this idea is not new to me. In fact throughout my life, I have more or less instinctively understood the truth of passages like this. But on the morning of March 4, the Lord spoke to me through this verse in a new way. For I was learning something new about what the words "a little" and "fear of the Lord" mean. What, after all, does "a little" mean? I still think that, even in my under-employment, the proper perspective on my current financial situation is that I am fabulously wealthy. As an American in Silicon Valley, I am bathed in riches and opportunity. But as each week ticked by, with no or few responses to my resumes, with job interviews, for jobs I was often over-qualified for, ending in definite "no" responses, I began to understand that the riches I was accustomed to might not be a sure thing. In fact, no material thing is "for sure." What I have, I have been given.¹¹ But I had become blind to seeing my life and my resources in this way. On the morning of March 4, though, the Lord was stripping away some of my blind-folds.

I think the incident that capped this "stripping away" process for me was one that involved my youngest child, my seven year old daughter Emily. We had become members of a health club last summer and through it my children could participate, at an extra but reasonable cost, on a swim team. Now when it came to swimming, Emily was a "spirit is willing, but the flesh is undisciplined" kind of person. With great energy and enthusiasm she loved to get out in the water and... thrash. She called it swimming—and she loved it. To get onto the team, you are supposed to be able to swim one lap in the pool. Emily couldn't do that. But we recognized her enthusiasm and asked the coach if she could try out anyway. It took the coach about .2 seconds before she realized what kind of potential Emily had. Even though she didn't meet the minimum requirements, she was allowed to join the team. Over the course of the fall, Emily became a fish: backstroke, breaststroke, freestyle—you name it, she learned to do it, with gusto. Now to top this off, a little girl that lives right across the street from us, one of Emily's good friends, also swims at the same club. Emily couldn't wait for the spring, because that's when her friend and she would be able to swim together. You can probably see where this story is going. After I got laid off, and we had eaten through all my severance pay, swim season was rapidly approaching. Betsy and I talked and regret-

fully decided that we couldn't afford to have Emily join swim team. In fact, maybe we ought to reconsider our club membership, as job prospects for me were not looking very good. But neither Betsy nor I said anything to Emily. We were still hopeful that a job might come through and that it might mean Emily could be on swim team. More importantly, we realized that it might be God's best for Emily, and for us as a family, that she not have the privilege of being on the swim team this year. My job situation, whether I like it or not, and the resulting financial condition we were in, was not one of God's mistakes. One day, Emily and I were going to go on an errand, and as we went to get into the car, we saw her friend out playing. She said to Emily, "My mom signed me up for swim team today. Has your mom signed you up yet?" I said nothing, but, heartbroken, I got into the car thinking, "Oh Emily, I don't think you're going to be able to join the team this year."

As a father, as the one who is supposed to be the provider for my family, this hurt. Those of you with children know what it's like to see them light up with enthusiasm for something, to really care, and really try to do well at something. You would do anything to support them in that activity. I plunked myself down in the car feeling like a complete failure. "Oh Lord," I cried out inwardly to him, "What are you doing this for?" In my head, I might know the ultimate truth of God's providential management of my life and finances. But in God's loving care for me, I also knew it was okay for this to hurt.

With this kind of mindset, Proverbs 15:16 became more poignant. "Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble with it." My problem was not a lack of material resources. My problem was twofold: I really do not know the "little" I need, and I am miles from understanding "the fear of the Lord" if I think that I am sufficient to be my family's provider, that somehow this is something that I control, that I own. The Lord is sovereign, not me. I am responsible for diligently trying to meet the needs of my family, "to aspire to live quietly, to mind [my] own affairs, and to work with [my] hands...so that [I] may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one." But the outcome of this effort belongs to the Lord. He will supply what I need. Will I trust him for this? Will I hand over to him the images I have of provision and fatherhood and trust that he will provide? He loves Emily more than I will ever even dream of. Can I trust him for that, for her?

I didn't know it then, but eventually God worked it out that Emily got to join the swim team. Back on March 4, though, I was in a lot of turmoil about that and many other issues. "All right, Lord," I said. "What's next?" What came next knocked me over.

Luke 12:16-21 says,

Then [Jesus] told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to

himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

I was feeling an incredible impulse towards being the father/provider for my family. I think that God puts this impulse in men at a very deep place, just like he puts the nurturing impulse in women at a fundamental level. So, this area threatened, I was madly trying to find a job. I was searching the web, going to interviews, trying to network. I was failing everywhere I turned. Nothing was happening. "God, don't you command me to be my family's provider? What are you doing?" But this parable in Luke grabbed me by the throat and shook me. "Fool, what if I call your soul to me tonight?" What does God want with all of my frustration, anger, resentment, confusion, and self-effort? The strong impulses I was feeling were good and right, but were not the most important thing. For under them, beyond them, deeper than them, there is the God of the universe calling to me. And he is asking me a question: "Do you trust me?" He wants me to trust him, to commune with him, to enjoy him. The size of the barns don't matter. The preoccupation with money and wealth is a false trail. The real issue is spiritual: Will I trust God who promises his love to me, who is the provider of all? Or will I be a fool, whose soul is required this very night?¹²

I grew up saying the Lord's Prayer every Sunday morning in church, and one of the lines in that prayer is, "Give us this day our daily bread." I think that it has only been in that last several weeks that I have begun to understand a little bit about being thankful today for God's provision for today. There have been several times in the last month or so when I can truly say that I have felt real gratitude in the morning for the fact that there is food in the refrigerator and a roof over the six heads in the DePangher family. And that is only the beginning of what God has provided. As I have said several times, the truth of the matter is that, despite my under-employment, I am materially very well off when compared to the rest of the world. But what God wants me to be is rich, rich in him. Am I at a place in my faith where I am rich toward God, or am blinded by the sawdust kicked up into my eyes as I work away on my new and bigger barns?

So that's a bit of what God has been teaching me in this season of un- and under-employment. But I want to add a little bit more. When I volunteered for this teaching assignment, I decided that I would ask around what other people's impressions were of their work. What

did it all mean to them? I was inspired by the responses I received:

There was the dentist who lit up with enthusiasm and love for God when talking of the opportunity he had of going to a prison in Central America because there he could exercise his professional skills in ministry and service. He spoke of a prison guard handing his automatic weapon to a prisoner so that he could step down into the waters of baptism there in the midst of prison; of hundreds of captive prisoners, singing songs together of freedom and liberty in the Lord. "My dental work is pretty routine," he said. "I like it, but it's the communication and closeness (we laughed about this use of the word!) with people that I really enjoy in my job."

There was the administrative assistant in a struggling start-up who used to work for City Team. "Do you know who's here in this building?" she asked me. "There's a Buddhist, two Hindus, one atheist, and a few people who seem to be Christians. But I don't know about their faith. What I like about work is that it is a place of ministry." There was the couple that does consulting work together, and the wife said to me: "He worries when we don't have enough work, and I worry when we have too much!" And in that statement was a testimony to the way God has made us, as men and women, who long to provide for and nurture our families.

There was the successful executive who told me this story, as we sat together over a lunch that he was graciously paying for: "Years ago, I had lunch with a Christian friend who was out of work. He said: 'You know, it is the strangest thing, but my Christian friends say that they will pray for us—but my non-Christian friends bring us groceries!' I have never forgotten that, so I want to be sure that my unemployed friends will get the prayers, yes; but also the groceries."

Finally, there is the humble carpenter from Nazareth who entered into the work world of everyone he met, telling them stories that would speak directly to their hearts and would give them a light to see spiritual truth by reflecting on the everyday circumstances and difficulties that they faced.

You know who I am referring to: the Lord Jesus. Ultimately, it is his work on the cross and his glorious resurrection that is rolling back the curse that God placed on Adam and the fallout that this has wrought upon the work of mankind. As he redeems us, day by day, the image in which we were originally created becomes more clear. He has transcended the daily drudgery of work and made it into an act of devotion and prayer. The curse of Genesis 3 will remain with us until God reveals the new heavens and the new earth. But until then, he uses the tensions created by that curse, including unemployment and the difficulties and confusion it creates in our lives, to call us to himself, to remind us that we need him for every single thing that we do in

life, and that without him, we are nothing. Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ, King of endless glory.

Let me close by reading for you the prayer I wrote on the morning of March 4.

Father,

In the midst of my unemployment and underemployment, I have many anxieties. But none of them is greater than this: that you, even you, O my Lord, desire to make me and my family experience poverty so that we will learn to depend upon you. It is sheer fantasy, Lord, for me to pretend to myself, or to say to you, that I want to be taught this lesson in this way. I do want, Gracious Father, to depend solely on you. It is my constant prayer: to know you, to love you, to have you alone as Lord of my life. And I know without a doubt that you are for me. Yet I am afraid, Father, simply afraid. I ask that this cup not come to me. Is there no other way? I spread out my hands before you and seek your mercy. Thank you that you have supplied (in incredible abundance!) for the needs of my family today. Today we have food and shelter. Thank you. Give me the courage to trust you and to take the next step that you would have me take. Amen.

Notes

1. Romans 8:19-23:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies (NRSV).

All biblical quotations are from RSV or NRSV.

2. 2 Thessalonians 3:10 (RSV).

3. 1 Thessalonians 4:10b-12 (NRSV).

4. God's curse in Genesis 3 was, in part, gender specific. Eve's curse involves childbirth, child rearing, and her relationship with her husband. Adam's curse involves his relationship to the ground, the source of his, and his family's, daily well-being. While it is true that everyone works, because all mankind, regardless of gender, is made in the image of God, I believe it is most true to God's word to recognize that the curses of Genesis 3 apply differently to men and to women. Men will feel the curse on the ground in their ability to provide daily bread for the family that God has given. Women will feel the curse in the pain of childbearing and child rearing, and in the complexities of their relationship with their husbands. Thus the male, as provider, and the female, as nurturer and raiser of children, seem to be the focus of how God creates tension, through the curse, that will constantly drive us to recognize our need for him.

On the other hand, everyone works: children, men, women—everyone at every stage of life. Any time we use a resource or

our time to do anything, we are working, and it is in this sense that I am focusing my comments in this message. Since I am male, I have been feeling most of my tension in the “provider” area of my life.

5. Ecclesiastes is full of comments about work. The one that spoke most directly to my heart was 2:11-23:

Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun... So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind. I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity (NRSV).

Many other passages in Ecclesiastes speak to the cursed condition of man's work.

6. I once had to fire an employee who had: (1) used company money to fly to Europe for a personal vacation, (2) failed to meet even the simplest of work assignments, and (3) stole the laptop computer that the company had supplied. Terminating this employee took months of painstaking paperwork, even though the violations were flagrant, proven, and ongoing. Stories like this are normal. Although I am here only speaking of employee abuse, I recognize that there is employer abuse as well. My own experience here in Silicon Valley, however, is that abuse is much more widespread on the part of employees.
7. Scripture provides a wonderful example of just such a skilled worker: Bezalel. See his story in Exodus 38.
8. When I first discovered this book in 1999, in a used bookstore in Mountain View, CA, I fell in love with it immediately. In

my study of medieval history, one of my heroes has been Bede, who lived in Northumbria in the 700's. His influence is pervasive in the book. The original title of the book was *A Northumbrian Office*. Since then it has come out in a second edition and, with regrettable marketing spin, is called *Celtic Daily Prayer: Prayers and Readings for the Northumbria Community* (HarperCollins, 2002).

9. A few weeks prior to this, my wife and I had decided that it was time for me to start looking anywhere in the country for a job, that I couldn't just continue to rely on looking around here. This is not something that I wanted to do. I want to stay here—but the Lord had been working on my heart, and I was becoming increasingly willing to do whatever he wanted me to do. I was also in the midst of receiving a “no” regarding a job that I had thought was the dream of a lifetime, and that many had encouraged me to do for many years.
10. For my devotional time, I translate some or all of the Bible passages for each day from the Latin of the Vulgate into English. Since the Vulgate is often inaccurate, especially in the Psalms, I then check the translation against a good modern version to make sure I am as close to the original text as I, a non-reader of the biblical languages, can be. The great benefit of translating, for me, is that it slows me down. I read each word carefully and thoughtfully and then render it into the best English I can. This not only helps me keep up on my Latin (something I very much want and like to do), but it forces me to encounter God's word slowly, deeply, and with a sense of awe.
11. This is where the medieval ideal of poverty, so richly experienced and expressed by St. Francis of Assisi, gets its Biblical power. The man begging on the street is no different than you or me in one important way: Everything we have, we are given out of the graciousness of God. The beggar has one key advantage—he is profoundly aware of his dependence!
12. The final reading from the Northumbrian Office for March 4 (Finian Readings) is by Simon Tugwell, an English Dominican. “Christianity has to be disappointing, precisely because it is not a mechanism for accomplishing all our human ambitions and aspirations; it is a mechanism for subjecting all things to the will of God.”

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