



WORK: A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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Genesis 2:15

Fourteenth Message

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1. Introduction

The theme of this series of messages is finding what we have termed the Spiritual Dimension of various aspects of life. We have already looked at such topics as singleness, suffering, sexuality, etc. The subject today is work. Is there a Spiritual Dimension to what we do in our daily occupations? While I will focus my comments on the kind of things we normally associate with having a job, these concepts will also apply to many other occupations of life. Your work is whatever occupies your time each day, whether you are paid for what you do or not. Whether you are a homemaker, a student, an artist or a young mother at home with little children, even if you are self-employed or retired, this will have an application in your life.

It might be a new notion to you that the typical job has any Spiritual Dimension. But where else other than the workplace do you hear the name of God mentioned so often, or see most of the Ten Commandments violated regularly?

There is much that could be said about work, especially from a Christian point of view. But, in the brief time that we have today, I will point out only a few of the many foundational spiritual issues that are related to work.

When I agreed to give this talk, I was not exactly pleased with my work situation (and I was the President!). My first thought each morning on getting to the office was, "How soon can I leave?" I remember seeing the book, *Your Work Matters to God*, in a Christian bookstore and thinking, "That's great. But why doesn't it matter to me?" God was gracious enough to "arrange" this opportunity to speak to help give me the answers I needed. I eventually made a job change just last month, so the issues I will be discussing here today are relevant and timely.

American society, and this is especially true for the Bay Area, places a high degree of importance on work. Recently, a man from the Czech Republic said to me, "In Europe, people have a life outside of their work, but here, 'who you are is what you do.'" Our business cards define us. Between jobs, I have carried a business card with just my name and address on it. I was always a little uncomfortable handing those out. Even I wasn't sure of who I was without a job title.

So our job title largely defines us in our culture. The question that arises then is, how successful are you in your career? Are you getting ahead? A young man who worked for me told me he was unhappy because he wasn't "getting ahead." When I asked him what that meant to him, he said he would let me know later. He would have to ask his wife. She had been telling him that he wasn't "getting ahead"!

The push to "get ahead" leads to a stressful work and home life in Silicon Valley. Pamela Pettler tries to help us see this in ourselves in her book, *The Joy of Stress*. With tongue in cheek, she writes about the supposed "benefits" of stress, and suggests how we can increase stress in our lives:

A True Story

One day in late 1969, in the research library of the University of California at Berkeley, a young man went berserk. He ran through the library, shouting hysterically at his astonished fellow students, "Stop! Stop! You're getting ahead of me!"

He was arrested. But what was his crime, really? *Being in the wrong decade*. As we all know, the sixties era, and its childish preoccupation with peace, good sex and battered VW buses, was little more than a black mark, a shameful demerit in the History of Stress.

Now, of course, in the stress-filled eighties, this concept of "getting ahead of me" has regained its rightful place of importance. In fact, it is one of the basic precepts of stress.

Simply stated, *people are getting ahead of you*. All the time.

While you're at your desk, people working out in the gym are getting ahead of you.

While you're at the gym, your coworkers are getting ahead of you.

If a friend gets a promotion at work, she has gotten ahead of you.

If a colleague reads a book you haven't read, he has gotten ahead of you.

The entire U.S. swim team has gotten ahead of you.

While you're reading this book, *everyone* is getting ahead of you.

The beauty of this concept is that it can be applied across the board, anywhere, anytime.

On the road? Drivers of more expensive cars have gotten ahead of you.

Watching TV? All the writers, actors, and technical crews have gotten ahead of you.

At Marine World? *The dolphins* have gotten ahead of you.

Always judge yourself, and your intrinsic moral worth, in terms of specific achievements as compared to others.

Always judge any situation in relation to how much the people involved have gotten ahead of you, and in what ways.

That helps us see the danger of estimating our intrinsic worth by comparing achievements in the work world. But, as Robert Bellah in *Habits of The Heart*, says, "However we define work, it is very close to our sense of self. What we 'do' often translates to what we 'are.'" This is the same conclusion voiced by my Czech friend. If work controls your identity, it will probably control everything else in your life.

So, our occupations do occupy us! And yet, the writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes concludes that work is futile:

**My heart took delight in all my work,
and this was the reward for all my labor.
Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun (Eccles. 2:10b-11, NIV).**

So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What does a man get for all the toil

and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless (Eccles. 2:20-23).

“Meaninglessness. Nothing gained. A chasing after wind.” Certainly, from what this writer observed, that seems to be the case as far as work is concerned. I have found that to be true in my conversations with others. I have had many breakfast and lunch meetings in which the primary topic was job dissatisfaction, a sense of futility, of a desire for something better, whatever that means.

Even at its best, work can be as absurd as a Dilbert cartoon. At its worst, it can grind you down and make you miserable both while you are at your job and when you are away from it.

Why does work often seem so futile, frustrating and unsatisfying? We need to go back to the beginning to see what went wrong.

2. “In The Beginning...”

If I were to ask you where we should turn to find the “beginning” of work in the Bible, you might suggest Genesis 3, as a consequence of the entrance of sin into the world. While that did affect the meaning of work as we now know it, we have to go further back, to Gen. 2:15, to find the introduction of work. Take note, men! Adam had to work even before Eve’s entrance into his life!

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Gen. 2:15, NIV).

Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it (Gen. 2:15, NASB).

This is Adam’s job description. It is a picture of what God originally intended work to be.

Adam is to “cultivate” and “keep” the garden. The first term, translated “cultivate,” is a common word. It is most often translated “serve,” although at times it is rendered “work” or even “worship.” “Serve” is the characteristic I want to focus on here. The second term, “keep,” means “to keep” or “watch” or “preserve.” In the NASB, the word is most often translated “keep,” and at times “careful.” It has the biblical sense of “stewardship.” As the NIV says, Adam was to “take care of” the garden which was not his.

I hesitate to introduce the word “steward” here, because we may have lost that concept in our culture. We tend to think of a steward as a sort of glorified butler. But until recent times, a steward was a responsible individual who was fully empowered to act on behalf of his employer. It may be hard to imagine today, but back then people did not have wire transfer of money, fax machines, or even e-mail! To be able to do business or manage your affairs from a distance you needed someone who could act on your behalf. Maybe our closest equivalents are the agents that represent American companies in other countries, or perhaps the idea of a power of attorney.

The role of a steward was common in biblical society. In Luke 16, Jesus told the parable of the steward who changed the amounts owed to his employer. Much to our surprise, the employer did not punish the steward, or even have him make restitution. He commended him! This is hard for us to understand, but it shows the power and autonomy of the steward and his position of trust. He was no glorified butler!

So at its best, we see that work, in its God-given original form, involved these two aspects of serving and stewardship. We are to be “servants” (responsible to...) and “stewards” (responsible for...). Adam was to be a steward of God’s earthly riches, responsible to serve in the garden. (Later we will see how these roles reappear in the New Testament.)

But after sin arrived, the whole structure of the external world

changed—and work changed as well. Here is God’s pronouncement:

3. “What went wrong?” (First Spiritual Dimension)

To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’

“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of 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” (Gen. 3:17-19, NIV).

Here we find the judgment that resulted from the sinful choice of men and women. Henceforth, work would be accompanied by “painful toil.” Notice that God does not curse work, but, rather, it is the ground that is cursed. And now what would have been a “joy” will require sweat and frustration, pain and sorrow to be productive. Does this sound like your job?

This word translated “toil” is used only three times in the Bible. Two of those usages are here in Genesis 3. This is a powerful word that means more than physical pain (although it includes that); it also has the idea of emotional pain, grief, and sorrow. It is the same word used in Gen. 3:16, where the woman is told that childbirth will be accompanied by “pain.” Painful toil accompanies work. Mothers can understand this painful toil, this double pain, both physical and emotional, that accompanies childbearing (and child raising). The only other occasion this word is used is in Gen. 5:29, where Lamech says of his new son Noah, “He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the Lord has cursed.”

The ancients had a better idea of what was going on around them than we do. They knew the world had changed. Our culture has lost that knowledge. Francis Schaeffer makes the point well: “...there is not a total unbroken continuity back to the way the world originally was...this is very important to the explanation of evil in the world. But it is not only that. It is one way to understand the distinction between the naturalistic, non-Christian answers and the Christian answer. The distinction is that as I look about me I know I live in an abnormal world.”

We must recognize that, from the biblical point of view, everything has changed. Not only our work, but our relationships with each other have been affected, and our relationship with God as well. This is not the way it could have been or will be. God had something much better available to us. But he also gave us free choice, and we took Plan B.

While the reference to “thorns and thistles” may be metaphorical to you, unless you are a gardener or farmer, this image means a lot to me. I grew up in a little town in rural Wisconsin. In the summer time, before I was old enough to get a real job, I could always make a little money by going down to the center of town early in the morning. A truck would come by there at 6 o’clock and pick up teenagers who wanted to work for the day. The job was to weed an immense field of mint plants by hand. I was put at the end of a row about a half mile long, and I had to get on my knees and go down that row pulling weeds. The only way to tell a mint plant from a weed was that mint had a square stem. The plants are quite fragile, so this work could not be done mechanically. Gloves were useless. Every so often I would grab a nettle plant. Talk about “thorns and thistles”! I was paid 40 cents an hour for this work. I know what you are thinking, “That must have been worth a lot more way back then.” But even “back then,” 40 cents an hour was not very much.

The point of all this is that now we can see that work is inherently frustrating and unsatisfying; and that it will be accompanied by “toil,” this special kind of grief and sorrow. With that in mind we need to ask if there can be any Spiritual Dimension to work. Does God have a purpose for allowing us to be in this situation? He does. As we have seen in the past weeks, as in many other areas of life, God’s purpose here is redemptive. We may seek to find our ultimate fulfillment in work (or in other activities), but if we cannot, we may eventually be driven to seek the Creator and Redeemer of Life—God himself. Work, your job, no matter how great it is now, will not, indeed cannot, provide you with ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment. Only a relationship with God can do that.

You might think, “If only I were the boss it would be better.” I have been the President or CEO of four companies in the past 15 years, and I can speak from experience that being “in charge” can greatly increase the frustration and futility of work. Yes, if you were the boss things would be different, but these basic issues would be unchanged.

This is the first Spiritual Dimension of work. Remember this tomorrow as the frustration builds, as you experience “painful toil” on the job. God has something better in store for you. He is willing to allow the futility of your work today to cause you to seek him.

4. Practical Value of Work/Blessing of a Job

At this point you may be thinking, “OK, so work is ultimately futile. But I have the distinct feeling that it would be better for me to show up on the job on Monday morning than not to!” On a practical level, having a job is better than not having one. Work has some value. It can even be a blessing. A paycheck with your name on it is a pleasant thing to receive.

The writer of Ecclesiastes agrees that even in the face of the ultimate futility of work we should not conclude that it is better to be lazy. “The fool folds his hands and ruins himself” (Eccles. 4:5). And as Paul says, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10). Also, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8, NASB).

There is much practical value to work, including:

- Work allows us to “eat” (i.e. to live and to provide for our family).
- Work allows us to help others.
- Work allows us to be creative.
- Work puts us into situations that develop our character.

Our pastor, John Hanneman, spends much of his time with the “TwentySomethings” who are just entering the work world. His advice to them about difficult job situations is: “It isn’t wrong to leave a job, but if you are leaving because you just can’t stand it, because you can’t get along with the people, it may well indicate that you need to stay. It is when you get to the place that you don’t need to leave that you are free. Maybe God is doing something in your life as a result of this particular job. If you leave with the lessons not completed, you will just face the same thing somewhere else.”

For these and other reasons we can see that work can actually be a gift from God.

5. A Biblical Perspective of Work (Second Spiritual Dimension)

What should be our attitude with regard to work? Paul describes the biblical perspective that points to another Spiritual Dimension of work.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey

them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him (Eph. 6:5-9).

The point of all this is that you are not working for the approval of others but for the Lord himself. Notice Paul’s emphasis, “as you would obey Christ,” “like servants of Christ,” “as if you were serving the Lord.” Think about what this means. When you work just for the approval of others it *does* matter who is watching, it *does* matter who gets the credit. We *do* get caught up in comparisons and people pleasing for selfish reasons.

The question for us is: In what do we place our identity? A title? A salary? A stock option? If our identity is based on our relationship with God, we will have a very different attitude about our work. As Paul says, we will work with “fear and trembling” (NASB), and with sincerity of heart. Our work will be characterized by humility and integrity. We will “fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen” (2 Cor. 4:18).

We will work:

- As servants of Jesus, doing the will of God from the heart, not with manipulative people-pleasing or in fear of the boss.
- Rendering service with good will.
- Knowing it is the Lord who will reward us (with the only reward that will matter).

If this sounds strange it is because it is so *rare* in the work place. Some years ago when I worked in a large company, I remember a young woman who was serious about her relationship with the Lord. Humbly and with great integrity she served those around her. Her godly spirit was a fragrance in that place. She was not concerned with position or power so she was free to “render service as to the Lord.” As for me, I was too preoccupied with my job title and the value of my stock options to serve anyone but myself. I learned from that woman that if your identity is based on a relationship with Jesus, you will have “freedom” at work. You will be free to serve in difficult, unrewarding or unnoticed situations, to ask those important but often unasked questions like, “Is this true? Is this right? Is this really what we promised the customer?” I once sat through a long business meeting during which the focus was on increasing the value of our shares on the stock market. After a few hours I mentioned the dreaded “C” word, “Customer.” I asked, “Why not see if we can be successful by considering the needs of our customers? What do they want? What have we promised?”

The right perspective will result in our having great freedom on the job. As a matter of fact, I was “given” my freedom from that job shortly after asking those questions!

Some people feel that the purpose for a job is having a platform for evangelism. But, as we saw earlier, work is far more than just a platform. And evangelism is far more than just words. Francis of Assisi said, “Preach the gospel constantly and, if necessary, use words.” Your values make a statement at work whether you intend that or not. You are already “preaching” some kind of message at work. Is it consistent with your desire to follow Jesus and to find your identity in your relationship with God? If not, your co-workers will see right past the most carefully crafted evangelistic formulations.

As we noted, before the Fall, Adam’s work was to be a steward of God’s earthly riches and to serve God by serving the garden. Today, on this side of the cross, after Jesus has paid the price to redeem us, we learn that from God’s point of view we continue to be “*steward servants*.” We are to be stewards of God’s spiri-

tual riches, and to serve God by serving one another. This is what Paul says in 1 Cor. 4:1 (NASB): “Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.”

The apostle also says, in Galatians 5:13, “do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.”

And 1 Peter 4:10 (NASB): “As each one has received a *special* gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

Having a biblical attitude about work and a clear understanding that by working “as if you were serving the Lord” (by being a steward of your spiritual gifts and by serving others), means that you will be willing to take on assignments that no one else will consider. The reality is that much work, whether at home or on the job, is drudgery, to be avoided as much possible. I am quick to say, “Someone has to do it,” then I try to make sure that it is not me.

Here is where we need to be reminded of whom we are serving. If it is another person, we may find excuses to be unavailable, but we are called to serve the Lord wholeheartedly. This has been termed “The Splendor of the Ordinary.” Hudson Taylor, the missionary to China in the 1800’s, said, “A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in a little thing is a big thing.” The best example of this in our time, Mother Teresa, said, “I don’t do big things. I do small things with big love.” Mother Teresa and Hudson Taylor could live with an attitude like that because they got their identity from their relationship with God, not from any accomplishment or title that the world values.

Paul summarizes this second Spiritual Dimension of work with these words:

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:17).

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 (Col. 3:23-24).

That is the attitude that we are called to have at work.

6. “Dark Night of the Soul”

While listening to Judy Squier last week, I began to think about my own work-related “Dark Night of the Soul.” I know exactly when and where that took place. It was in mid-1995, on an airplane ride from Chicago to San Jose. I had been CEO of a company in the early 90’s which had been sold and so I “retired” at the end of 1994. I spent a few delightful months relaxing, enjoying time with my youngest son and taking some long bicycle rides. When I decided to go back to work, I quickly found a position that I thought would be just right for me, with a small local company that had a larger parent company in Chicago. I met with the recruiter and a manager here. Everything went well and soon I was on my way to Chicago to meet with the senior managers of the parent company. I expected to get a job offer.

I had been given an agenda with an impressive list of managers to meet. The first person on the list came into the small interview room, and within minutes I knew that something was

wrong. He barely looked at my resume, seemed disinterested, and excused himself in less than 15 minutes. I sat alone for awhile. Finally, another man, not on the interview list, entered the room. He asked a few more questions, but after ten minutes he said that my interview session was over. All the others on the list were unexpectedly occupied, and I was free to leave. They called the airline and got me on an earlier flight, and shortly I was standing in the lobby waiting for a taxi. I had expected to have a job offer when I left that day; now all I had was a voucher for a taxi ride! I had a four-hour plane trip to take this up with the Lord.

Here was something completely beyond my control. When difficult situations had arisen in the past, things like no orders, no money for payroll, key people quitting, etc., I always felt there was something that I could do to solve the problem. That is why this experience was so painful. There was nothing that I could do except take it to the Lord.

By the time that I got off the plane, God had graciously reminded me that nothing important had changed. Jesus had died for me, and I had trusted in that fact. God was still real, and still able, and this setback had not put me beyond his reach to care for me.

Does that mean I was immediately at peace about this situation, and now I am “happy, happy, happy all the day”? No. Even though it is three years later it still hurts to remember that day, although now I can more readily put God’s perspective alongside that pain.

7. Summary/Conclusion

We have discussed two Spiritual Dimensions of work. The first is that work is inherently unsatisfying, but God can use work to cause us to seek something better—a relationship with him. Even if we have a great job, God does not want us to get stuck there. He does not want us to be like a child on Christmas morning who plays with the wrapping and never gets around to opening the gift. He has something better for us.

The second Spiritual Dimension is that followers of Jesus can have a different attitude about work. We can work as servants of the Lord and as stewards of what he has provided. On Thursday we will celebrate Thanksgiving. This is a good opportunity to remind ourselves of the things God has provided and for which we are stewards. This attitude about work is actually a question of identity. It requires us to place our identity in our relationship with God, and to trust in his power and leading on a day by day, moment by moment basis.

The world around us asks, “What do you do?” and “How successful are you?” Henri Nouwen has well said, “The question is not:...How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus?...In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, that cares, that reaches out and wants to heal.”

My prayer for each of us is that we will be that kind of person: in love with Jesus and listening to the heart of God, at work and in every situation.

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