**The Struggle of Work**

Genesis 3:17-24

Last week we saw that all work is a gift from God.

**All work is a Gift from God**

* A gift to us
* A gift through us

“And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion…” Genesis 1:28

**Work was a part of the original creation** about which God said, “It is very good.” Work itself was not a curse or consequence of sin. Work was a blessing - a gift - both to Adam and Eve as part of how they were to reflect the image of God and a gift through them to the world.

Just as God worked to form and fill the world, so people are called to form and fill the world - ***to create and cultivate*** the place God made for us. We are not park rangers monitoring and patrolling the world. We are gardeners - working the land, improving it, developing it to maximize human flourishing. The command to “fill the earth” was not just about multiplying the number of people but about spreading civilization and society throughout the earth. “Fill the earth with life and love and truth - all for the glory of the God who made you!”

All work is a gift from God. But we need to avoid **two mistakes** when it comes to work.

**All work is a Gift from God**

* Don’t resent work as a **Curse**
* Don’t rely on work as a **Cure**

We can adopt a view of work that we must ***simply endure it*** - put our heads down and get through it… A hopeless, resigned, resentful attitude that everything is meaningless and hopeless. That is not a Christian view of work! Work is filled with potential to glorify God and bless other people!

But we must not swing to the other side and rely on work as the cure for everything else in life. ***We must not worship work*** as our functional savior and lord. Work is a GOOD thing but it must not become a GOD thing to us. When we work - especially in an area that lines up with the passions and skills God gave us - we do feel His pleasure, we feel His glory reflecting from us.

As Eric Liddle said in Chariots of Fire, ***“When I run, I feel God’s pleasure.”*** He was built to run. He ran fast for the glory of God. If you were built to crunch numbers - then run those numbers for the glory of God! If you were designed to work with people - then serve people for the glory of God! If you were designed to build things - then build things for the glory of God, showing that all that YOU do is a gift from Him!

Work is not a curse to be endured, but nor is it a savior to be worshiped. It is a gift to be grateful for and an opportunity to steward, like everything else God has given us.

But today we see that while all work is a gift, all work is also a struggle.

**All work is a Struggle**

* It is never Easy
* It is never Finished
* It never fully Satisfies

***Because of the fall*** of Adam and Eve, all work is affected, tainted, damaged, corrupted. So let’s look at Genesis 3, after the first couple broke the one rule God gave them and ate from the forbidden tree. Because of their rebellion the whole world was broken - and work was changed. Here are the three ways work became a struggle: 1) it is never easy; 2) it is never finished and 3) it never fully satisfies us. First:

1. **Work is Never Easy**

“Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.” Genesis 3:17-18

***Notice the grace of God in this moment.*** Adam was the one who had failed. He rebelled against the clear command of God. He ate the fruit he was commanded not to eat. The warning from God was “in the day you eat of it, you will surely die.” So when God came to pronounce judgment, finding Adam and Eve hiding in the garden, half covered with hastily sewn together fig leaves, Adam fully expected the curse to fall on him. Adam expected God to execute him.

But look what God did. “Cursed is the GROUND because of you.” The curse did not fall on Adam and Eve immediately that day. ***God redirected the curse***, away from Adam, to the ground - the earth. And, of course, ultimately God redirected the curse, away from Adam, and onto Jesus.

So while there was a consequence for sin that we all still experience today, we see God’s mercy and grace even in the struggle of work. Still today God does not strike us dead when we sin and rebel against Him. Even when our sin makes our lives a little more thorny and thistle-y, ***God does not curse us with instant death but simply allows us to reap a little of what we have sown.*** And often it is those thorns and thistles that lead us back to the cross.

**How is YOUR work a struggle right now?** What thorns and thistles are you dealing with?

* There are challenges that come with working with **sinful people** - those are often the biggest thorns in our side. Maybe you have a difficult boss or co-worker. Maybe you have an employee who isn’t pulling their weight.
* Other challenges comes from **the fallen world itself**. I know many of you have been greatly impacted by the virus - shutting down the travel and hospitality industry. Many of our people work in the medical field and are face to face every day with the giant thistle called COVID-19.
* There are struggles with **our own sinful hearts**. Everything we do is tainted by our own selfishness and pride. An unkind word can damage morale on your team. One foolish or impulsive choice, one comment in a meeting, can set back a company or ministry for a year. We all have weaknesses and blindspots and these can be big thorns and thistles in our work.
* And don’t forget **the enemy of our souls.** Life is a spiritual battle, as we’ll see in a couple of weeks in Ephesians 6. The devil is real and his army of demonic forces will do everything they can to mess with us. A demon can’t possess a Christian but it certainly can harass us.

Work is a struggle. It is never easy. But there’s more bad news.

1. **It is Never Finished**

“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.” Genesis 3:19

In the garden, work was a joy. Outside the garden, work became a struggle. And a big part of the struggle is the inescapable awareness that our work is never done.

* **You mow the lawn** and a few days later you’re either annoyed that it has grown back up so fast or you’re worried that it has gotten too brown and dried out.
* **You do the laundry** and the very next day “laundry mountain” is already Everest again.
* **You run the financial report for the month** and just a few days later start on the report for the next month.
* **You clean one patient’s teeth**, take a breath and the next patient is already in the chair.

We eat bread, but it comes by the sweat of our faces. **Imagine being a farmer.** You till the ground, you plant your seeds, you water your fields and pray for a good harvest. Sometimes it’s a good harvest, other times it’s more meager. But either way, you don’t get a very long break before you start over again with tilling the fields, planting the seeds, and on and on. Our work is never finished.

**If you work with THINGS** you count on this, right? Homes break down. Cars break down. Air conditioners need to be repaired and replaced. Homes need to be rehabbed and flipped.

**If you work with PEOPLE** it’s just as true, right? As soon as one recovers from an illness, there is a new problem that crops up. As soon as you address one problem in your marriage, two more pop up to take its place. As soon as you work through one challenge with your kids, the next one appears.

Our work is never finished. This is the nature of life in a fallen, broken world. Stay tuned. For the Christian believer, there is hope of a better world! Here is the third reason work is a struggle:

1. **Work is Never Fully Satisfying.**

“Till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Genesis 3:19b

Work is never finished. And then you die. King Solomon wrestled with this reality in the depressing book Ecclesiastes. He concluded that “everything is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” The wisest King who ever lived, the man who literally had EVERYTHING - the greatest power, the most glorious kingdom, all the beautiful women you could imagine, all the fulfilling projects, all the fame, all the wealth. And, in the end, he concluded - it is ALL meaningless. **Like chasing the wind**.

Like searching for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. ***Like hunting for SNIPE*** with your camp counselor who gave you a flashlight and a paper bag and taught you the call of the snipe and where they like to hide, under logs and big rocks at midnight…

Work cannot fill the hole in our hearts that longs for meaning, significance and fulfillment. It partially satisfies but it can never fully satisfy. We always know there is something missing.

In 2015 I got to work with Stephen Baldwin.



He came to our church in Chicago to perform a one man show as the thief on the cross. It was very cool.

Stephen is the younger brother of the more famous Alec Baldwin - one of the four Baldwin brothers who all defied their teacher father’s instructions and went into acting instead of a more reliable profession. Alec ended up being the most famous, but Stephen did pretty well as the comic relief in the TV series Young Riders, and then hit it big with his part in The Usual Suspects.

***On the surface, he had everything*** - wealth, fame, good prospects for his career in Hollywood - even a beautiful wife, Kennya, he met on the bus in New York. But early in their marriage, when their daughters were small, they hired a Nanny from Brazil, where Kennya grew up.

**Augusta, the Nanny**, was always singing about Jesus as she worked around the house. Eventually Kennya, who understood the Portuguese, asked her about it - and August started to share about her faith. Before long Kennya went to church with her and gave her life to Christ. For a full year Kennya read her Bible and prayed, kneeling on the floor by their bed, and Stephen would step carefully over her, wondering what had happened to his wife.

Then **9/11 happened**, which served as a wake up call for him. He started going to church with his wife, started reading the Bible - and eventually became convinced that the Jesus he had heard about as a child in the Catholic Church, was - in fact - the divine Son of God and Savior of the world.

Stephen was never one to do something halfway. So ***when he came to Jesus he was all in*** - deciding to be the most radical Christian the world had ever seen. So when our church called him to be involved in a stage play at first he said, “No,” since he has never done live theater. But when our event director said, “You’d get to be the thief on the cross,” without any more thought or deliberation he said, “Ok, I’ll do it.”

For over 15 years now Stephen has been serving the Lord and preaching the gospel however he can. He loves to share his story of gaining everything in the world and eventually realizing it was nothing - ***the world cannot satisfy***. He saw that his wife had found something that appeared to really help her. He explored the Jesus she had found and discovered that only Jesus can truly satisfy the deepest longings of our souls.

So that transitions us from the bad news to the good news. All work is a struggle, but God can redeem our work through the Gospel. Here are three ways the Gospel redeems and transforms our work. First:

**How the Gospel Redeems Work**

1. Jesus gives us Help to do the work

“Be filled with the Spirit… slaves obey… masters do the same…” Ephesians 5:18; 6:5,9

All of the exhortations about marriage, parenting, work and prayer in Ephesians 5 and 6 flow directly from **the primary command** to “be filled with the Spirit.” It is only as we are filled with the Spirit that wives can submit respectfully and husbands can serve sacrificially. It is only as the Spirit leads and empowers parents that we can lovingly lead and discipline them. And it is only with the Holy Spirit’s power that both employees and employers can honor God with our work.

Jesus gives us HELP to do our work. ***We are not working ALONE***, but with Him and for Him. Remember, Jesus said “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” The reason that His yoke is easy is that He pulls alongside us. We don’t have to do the heavy lifting, we just need to stay in step with Him.

***Christians should be markedly different from non-Christians*** in the way we work - because we have the Holy Spirit to fill us, guide us and strengthen us. Work is a struggle, but we have resources to manage the stress, purpose to honor God even in the hard times, faith to carry us through confusion and difficulty, support from other believers, and so much more!

***How do you approach your work?*** Do you see it as YOUR work? Or as work you do WITH JESUS? **Do you pray to start your day and then shut off your prayer time** and go about the rest of your day on your own?

I’ll be honest that some days are like that for me. It’s probably not something a pastor should admit, but there it is. Even ministry can be done ***“in the flesh,”*** instead of “in the Spirit.” I can easily start the day depending on the Lord, calling on Him and then flip the switch to Darin-mode, trusting in my own ideas, following my own plans. Looking back, those are the fruitless days; the days when the least actually gets done.

Jesus is with us all the time. Let’s walk with Him, aware of His presence through His Spirit, calling on Him to fill us, lead us and strengthen us in our work. Let’s take the approach of Brother Lawrence in *Practicing the Presence of God* and recognize God’s presence in every task, throughout the day - even mundane things like washing dishes.

That’s the first way the Gospel redeems our work - Jesus helps us with the struggle of work. Second:

**How the Gospel Redeems Work**

1. Jesus gives us Hope in His finished work

“Knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.” Ephesians 6:8

***Our calling is to work WITH the Lord and FOR the Lord.*** And this changes how we work altogether. Work is never easy, but with the Lord it becomes possible. Our work is never finished, but when we work for the Lord our work is infused with hope - that what we do is part of God’s bigger work, His bigger plan.

Hear this verse and ***apply it to your work this week***. “Whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord.” This was written to **SLAVES** in the first century. So even if you feel like an indentured servant, doing the most mundane and repetitive work - ANY GOOD that you do - anything you do with the power of the Spirit, for the glory of the Lord - whatever good you do - you WILL receive back from the Lord.

***There will be a reward*** for the good work we do. In the end, it will all be worth it - because of ETERNITY. If this world were all there is, life would be very depressing. We would have to agree with Solomon that everything is meaningless and just a chasing after the wind. But since we know that God will re-make the entire universe and we will dwell with Him forever, we know that even our greatest suffering, even our biggest challenges are preparing us for “an eternal weight of glory” that will make it all worth it in the end.

Do you believe this? ***Do you believe that Jesus will reward you for all that you do?*** When we set our hearts on this world - working only for money or recognition or advancement - what we are doing is rejecting the Biblical worldview that we will live forever and embracing a secular worldview that this world is all there is so you better “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”

Jesus gives us help, He gives us hope and one more:

**How the Gospel Redeems Work**

1. Jesus gives us Happiness beyond work

“Obey… with a sincere heart as you would Christ… with a good will as to the Lord…” Ephesians 6:5,7

***The work we do is HEART-work***, even if it’s with our hands. You may have an earthly boss but you don’t work for him or her - you work for the Lord. In the end, the specific work we do doesn’t matter. It’s not that high level, “professional” work is more valuable and significant and will weigh in the eternal scales better than more repetitious “blue collar” work.

**What will matter in the end is not the work we have done but the HEART behind that work.**

* At the end of your life, will you have worked for YOURSELF or for the Lord - for your glory or for His?
* In the end, will you have stored up treasure on earth - possessions and trophies that will rust and rot - or will you have treasure in heaven because you have devoted yourself fully to the Lord?
* Will you have a clear conscience about the way you have done your job - knowing that you honored God with your choices? Or will you have regrets about things you know you should not have done, or should have done, to please your true Master?

We work for God, not for people. You can only serve one Master. Paul addresses both slaves and masters in this context. Listen to verse 9 - it is striking!

**How the Gospel Redeems Work**

1. Jesus gives us Happiness beyond work

“Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven.” Ephesians 6:9

Did you catch that? “Do the SAME to them…”? What the same? He just told slaves to OBEY, are Masters supposed to obey their slaves? No. ***Masters are to obey JESUS and work for Him in the same way slaves are to obey Jesus and work for Him.*** Whether you have a high level, executive position or an entry level internship - you have the same Master - Jesus!

This is why the work we do doesn’t matter in the end - what matters is who we do it for. If you wash the dishes and do the laundry and mow the lawn **FOR JESUS** - He will smile at you one day and say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” If you sit in board meetings, allocate millions of dollars and set policy for thousands of employees **FOR YOURSELF** - Jesus will shake His head and say, “All of that was for nothing - wood, hay and stubble that will be burned up in the final judgment.”

Where is your heart today when it comes to work? Do you have a sincere heart and a good will, working for the Lord, not for people - not for yourself?

Jesus gives us help. He gives us hope and ***He gives us a limitless reservoir of HAPPINESS*** in Himself if we will just walk with Him - be filled up by Him - enjoy and delight in Him. Work cannot save you. Only Jesus can save you. Our work will always be a struggle. It will never be finished. It will never satisfy us. But with Jesus - even the most difficult work can be a joy.

**J.R.R. Tolkien** is one of my favorite authors of all time. He wrote the Lord of the Rings series, starting with the Hobbit. It was his life’s work. As a professor of medieval literature in England he taught by day but kept working by night on building a world, developing a history, multiple languages and thousands of years of history as a backdrop for a powerful story.

As ***World War 2*** was cranking up and the danger of German bombs was a daily threat, Tolkien became worried about his work - would he be able to finish it before he died? Would it all get burned up in a bombing raid?

He wrote a short story called Leaf: By Niggle - that illustrated his emotional state. Niggle was a struggling artist who had a vision of a tree he wanted to paint. He started with a normal size canvas but quickly realized it was too small for the tree he wanted to create. So he got a canvas the size of a large wall and a ladder so he could start to work on it.

In his mind, Niggle saw not just the tree, but the land beyond the tree - ***a whole world of beauty*** and excitement. He wanted to paint it all. So he got started with one leaf. He worked and worked on that painting - coming back to it every day - trying to get every shade, every detail, every glimmer of light just right. And always worrying that he wouldn’t finish - that it wouldn’t be enough - that he would die and no one else would ever see that tree.

**Niggle**. Isn’t that a great name? That was Tolkien’s view of himself. He was just niggling away at a painting he felt he could never finish.

Of course, Tolkien did finish Lord of the Rings - and it has become a timeless classic that has inspired generations with courage and camaraderie - commitment to the higher calling even at the risk of your own life. But in all of his work Tolkien felt that he would never finish - that his work would never be enough.

In the short story, Niggle dies and all he has finished is a single leaf. One leaf. It’s beautiful - nearly perfect. But it is just one leaf. It’s nice enough that they display it for several years in a local art gallery. But very soon it is stored away and forgotten.

But after Niggle dies he goes to heaven and as Jesus opens the gates of heaven for him the first thing Niggle sees is the tree. The tree he longed to paint - **FINISHED**. Every leaf is there in exquisite detail. And beyond the tree is the whole world he imagined and infinitely more he could never have dreamed.

This is our hope and our promise! Our work is a struggle. It is never finished and can never satisfy. But Jesus is working and His work WILL BE finished. We do our little part - niggling away at our individual LEAVES - and trust Him to finish the tree, and the whole world beyond it.

Let’s pray.