

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

719 Earl Garrett Street
Kerrville, TX 78028

Three Sermon Outlines on

Work and Faith

**“Thank God It’s Monday:
A Biblical Theology of Work”**

Rev. Corey Widmer

SERMON NOTES

*The
High Calling
of Our
Daily Work*

*Making a real living connects you to a bigger picture,
a grand design, an abundant life.
Each of us has only a small part to play, but what a part!
It’s the high calling of our daily work.*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge
TheHighCalling.org

Thank God It's Monday: A Biblical Theology of Work

Introduction to the Sermon Series

A seminary professor of mine once suggested an interesting practice that I still follow today. He advised that when meeting a parishioner, try to arrange to meet him or her at their place of work. After doing this a few times, I was surprised and amused by the reactions. Usually the person is initially confused at why I want to meet them at their workplace. After explaining that I like to see where they are called to live out their discipleship in their everyday life, I am usually met with either pleasure (“No one has ever wanted to see my workplace before!”) or embarrassment (“I don’t think this is the sort of place that preachers would like to see.”). But overall, it has cemented my belief in the pervasive presence of the sacred/secular divide among contemporary Christians. The majority of our laypeople have no idea how their faith connects to the substance of their everyday work, and the alarming invasion of their pastor into their place of work exposes that disconnect: religion stays at church, work stays at work. This is not their fault; it’s ours. We have done an adequate job at equipping our people for the private, spiritual parts of their lives, but an abysmal job at equipping them for the public, secular parts of their lives. Of course, it is the latter parts where they spend most of their time.

This set of three sermons is a suggestion for a three-week sermon series that surveys a simple biblical theology of work. It draws from the Old Testament creation narrative, Old Testament wisdom literature, and a New Testament epistle.

Sermon 1: The Goodness of Work

Sermon 2: The Problem of Work

Sermon 3: The Redemption of Work

May God give us all the grace to equip our people to see how the Lordship of Jesus Christ extends to every area of their lives, especially their work!

Grace and peace,
Corey Widmer

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Work is contributing to the common life of the world, joining with God in sustaining creation. And this is all the more true for Christians, for we know the God who creates and sustains, and our own work mirrors the loving purposes of our creative and loving God. So don't work just to make money. There are many jobs that are very profitable and legal, but are not strengthening the fabric of our world or bringing more value to those around us. Indeed, there are some forms of work that could very well be negatively impacting the world, the poor, or the environment. Instead, work to love. Work to serve the common good—out of love for the world and the people God has made. Like God, use your work to bring order out of chaos—making the world orderly, livable, beautiful: reflecting the God who made you.

Summary and Conclusion

Today we have reflected on the Creation narrative and what it speaks to us about work. We have drawn from it two simple lessons: that the nature of work is good and that the purpose of work is love. Both of these aspects of work reflect the holy nature of the loving God who made us.

The gospel is the good news that through Jesus Christ, we may be reconciled to our Creator and restored to our intended purposes. So many people are wandering aimlessly wondering what is the point of their lives, living in a ground-hog-day-like cycle of meaninglessness as they run the rat race of our world. Family of God, see this amazing hope we have to offer to the world! Through Jesus Christ, not only is God offering eternal life but also hope for our daily existence, an invitation to know the God who created you and to know the reason for your existence! The gospel is not just an eternal hope for heaven, but a temporal hope for our daily workaday lives. There is more meaning to your life than you ever imagined, to join the work of a loving God in sustaining creation. What a purpose, what a calling. Thanks be to God.

Sermon 2 The Problem of Work

Text: Selected Proverbs 12:1, 13:4, 15:19, 19:5, 21:25, 24:30-34, 26:13-16

Dominant Thought: Though God has created our work to be good, it is cursed and distorted principally by our sinful self-absorption. But there is hope in the gospel, not just for our souls, but also for our work.

Introduction

My first job was as a maintenance worker at a summer camp. It felt exhilarating to be personally responsible for my own paycheck, and I was excited and idealistic about the duties before me. However, over the next few months, I realized how ill-equipped I was for the job. Over the course of the summer, I managed to damage a truck, crash a maintenance cart, lose many tools, rip a door off a shed, and set a patch of grass on fire. Needless to say, I was not asked to fill that job again. My idealistic expectations about the work crashed into the reality of my own incompetencies.

Last week we looked at the Creation narrative and discovered two fresh lessons about our daily work: that the nature of work is good and that the purpose of work is love. But we all know that the story of work does not end there. At some point, our ideal visions of work crash up against the reality of what

work is actually like in the world. Today we examine the problem of work from the perspective of the wisdom literature, which offers us some of the most realistic and clear-thinking reflections on work in the Bible. The book of Proverbs shows us just how “cursed” work is, but also gestures toward how the problem is healed.

Point 1: The External Problem of Work

A good portion of the verses about work in Proverbs point out the simple fact that work is hard. Proverbs 15:19 and 24:30-31 both reference the way of work being “blocked with thorns.” This is a subtle reference to Genesis 3:18, where God curses work as a dimension of his punishment for human rebellion. “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it...it will produce thorns and thistles for you, by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food” (Genesis 3:17-19).

Work itself is not a curse, but the fact that work is hard and painful is. Every once in a while you have that perfect day, where everything goes right. But most of the time, it’s not. Most of the time things seem to go wrong: tension in the office, you dislike your job, the market tanks, a project fails. This is the external problem with work: our world is broken and our work is cursed, therefore it will always feel difficult, exhausting, and sometimes even meaningless. This is an ongoing part of our human experience that will endure until the Kingdom comes.

Point 2: The Internal Problem of Our Work

But there is an inner problem as well, what Proverbs calls “sluggardliness.” In the book of Proverbs, the term “sluggard” is its way of addressing the internal problem with our work: that most of the time we don’t get work right *personally*. All of us tend to either underwork or overwork, but in both cases we do not achieve the purpose of work that God assigned it. Let’s look at both.

First, underwork (Read Proverbs 26:13-16). This passage describes a guy making pathetic excuses about why he can’t go to work (“There is a lion in the road”). A modern version of this might be: “I can’t go to work; I might get hit by a truck.” This is a mocking commentary on our tendency to make excuses when work or the task at hand is difficult. Proverbs pokes fun of our ability to make up the most preposterous excuses to get out of the difficult thing we know we must do. You have a responsibility to take care of, but suddenly you really want to organize your desk, or call that person you have not spoken to in seven months. The proverb suggests that the motive behind such excuses is fear (thus the imagery of the lion). We may be afraid of failure, we may be afraid of losing, or we may be afraid simply of how difficult something will actually be.

But that’s not all. Proverbs 26:14 says, “As a door turns on its hinges, so does a lazy person in bed.” The sluggard is moving, but he is so hinged to his need for comfort that he cannot move beyond his self-absorbed ruts. This is powerful commentary because it shows that you may be busy, moving back and forth, but you are busy with the wrong things. Technology enables us to do enormous amounts of useless busywork that is in reality complex forms of procrastination and avoidance. In many cases what is supposed to be time-saving is actually time-draining: using our resource and energy to feed our appetites for comfort and to avoid the difficult thing.

Proverbs 26:15 states, “The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth.” This critiques our inability to follow through on our responsibilities. We start something but can’t finish it. For many of us, this is our tendency when work gets difficult or boring. We get so rest-

less or bored or frustrated in our work that we are convinced that what we need is not to stick with what we're doing and follow through, but get a new job, find a new position, get a new location. We blame our poor follow-through on others: My boss is incompetent, my colleague talks too much about her cat, my office is too dark.

Finally, Proverbs 24:30-34 suggests that the sluggard is so foolish and out of touch with reality that he does not have the discipline or judgment to see beyond his immediate moment. There is much in Proverbs about discipline as the path to freedom, but the sluggard sees discipline as a restriction of personal comfort and independence. For anyone to become great at anything—whether it be a musician or athlete or poet or author or banker—requires self-discipline, habitual practice, and attending to the details. But the sluggard is so absorbed in his immediate need for comfort that he cannot see beyond it, and therefore is never free.

This is the sin of underwork: enslaved to a need for comfort, crippled by fear of what is difficult, paralyzed by a need for independence— a wasting of life.

Second, overwork. Proverbs 12:1 states that “He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment.” This suggests that the wise person understands the purpose of work, knows that it is for serving God and serving others. The sluggard in this case is not someone who is lazy but works *for the wrong reason*. He works to “chase fantasies” or literally, worthless things (Hebrew: *requeem*). This is criticizing the person who works, not primarily to serve God and others, but to serve himself and his needs, to accumulate riches, to acquire “stuff,” to make his life comfortable, easy, and secure.

If you are known as a hard worker, have you ever asked yourself why you work so hard? Money is a lousy reason to work a job. Wealth and status are not just bad motivations, they are *foolish* reasons according to the book of Proverbs, sluggardly reasons to work a job. Work is for the common good, to reflect the God that made you. There are many who work jobs that they hate but stay there because of the money or status it brings them. But the book of Proverbs says that if that's you, you are a sluggard. You are working for the wrong reason, you are chasing worthless things, not using work for what it was made for.

So this is the problem: we humans either underwork or overwork. But Proverbs sees the root of both of these problems to be SELF-ABSORPTION. Proverbs 19:15 says, “Laziness brings on deep sleep.” To sleep is to be shut off from the world, unconscious of the situations of others. Work is designed for partnering with God and contributing to the common life of society. But in our self-absorption we get so bound up in maintaining our lives, our world, our families, our future, our investments, our estates, our job security, our comfort, that we wall ourselves off from the world and our work and we become blind and indifferent to the needs of the people around us. We become “shut off”—shut off from the life of God, his love, his passion, and activity in the world. Shut off from others and their needs. Shut off from the way that you in a particular and powerful way are called to join God in serving the people and the world that he has made.

This is why 21:25 says sluggardliness leads to death—because we are cutting ourselves off from the very thing we were made to do. To be cut off from God and to be cut off from others is to be cut off from the very purpose of your existence. And that is death.

Point 3: The Healing of Our Work.

Proverbs 13:4 and 21:25 both reference the sluggard's "cravings." This is significant because it demonstrates that what makes us sluggards and distorts our work is not so much a *lack* of desire but *distorted* desire. We desire, crave, and over-desire the wrong things. The reason work gets distorted is because we want the wrong things.

Some of us want *comfort*, so we overwork to buy things that will make us comfortable. Or, we underwork to shield our comfortable little worlds.

Some of us want *approval*, so we overwork to get the approval of our bosses and friends and families and teachers. Or, we underwork or do jobs that we hate because we are too afraid to take risks or to disappoint the ones we love.

Some of us want *control and power*, so we overwork to get more control over our environments and work becomes addictive. Or, we underwork because we want to be our own bosses and don't want anyone to order us around.

All this is about our *cravings*. We underwork or overwork because of what we want: status, sense of identity, power, control, approval from others. So work gets messed up because we desire the wrong things. What we need is for work to be redeemed. But more so, we need our cravings, our hearts, to be redeemed. We need our hearts to be set free from the inordinate desires so work can have the proper place in our lives. How does that happen?

Jesus once said: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 6). Jesus is saying that first, he will give you rest. He will satisfy your cravings. He will tame the over-desires, the sluggard in you. Jesus promises to satisfy the deepest cravings of our hearts. He says, I will satisfy your need for approval in my affirmation. I will release you from your need for control with my greatness and glory. I will satisfy your need for comfort with my love. He promises to give you rest, satisfaction, and fulfillment to all those inordinate cravings and desires that are rolling around in you.

Then, Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you." A yoke was a wooden bar laid across two animals so they could work together. Jesus is saying: I will give you rest so you can get to work, but work in a way that isn't distorted and oppressive. If you want to work for me, you've got to rest IN me. And once you rest IN me, you can work for me and for the right reasons.

Summary and Conclusion

The gospel of Jesus Christ is an invitation for our working lives to be healed. The gospel is the announcement that Jesus Christ has worked for you—he has done everything necessary for your salvation. He has lived for you, died for you, and risen for you. He has died for our self-absorption and set us free that we may now live for God and for others. He heals our cravings and lets us be satisfied in his grace alone. Only then will our work be healed, when we are set free from our selfish needs and self-protecting ways and have all our cravings satisfied in him.

So trust in Jesus Christ freshly today, not just for your souls, but also for your work. It's the best thing that could ever happen to your 9-to-5.