

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(April 27, 2014)

Pastor Jeff Harrison

### **Finding Meaning in Work**

Ephesians 2:1-10; Genesis 1-2; Colossians 3:22-24

#### **Introduction:**

##### **A. Monster.com illustration reminds us of the brokenness of work**

Start showing monster.com Super Bowl ad “When I Grow Up” found at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myG8hq1Mk00>

That’s a funny commercial, though the humor may hit a little too close to home. For we start with these dreams as kids, and they certainly don’t include filing all day, clawing our way up to middle management, or being forced into an early retirement. Or as Kevin Jones says it, growing up we don’t dream of suppressing common sense for company policy, being forced to play political games to keep our job, or writing reports that no one will ever read.<sup>1</sup>

At times our work feels frustrating, pointless, impossible, or all of the above. And some of us deal with the added stress of health challenges or unemployment. As Genesis 3 says, sin has brought brokenness to our work. The ground is now cursed and we’ll only eat food from it through painful toil, by the sweat of our brow.

##### **B. How can we find greater meaning in our work?**

Now although our work will include struggles until Christ returns, Jesus wants to work within our work situations, today. But how can we find greater meaning in our work? As we look at the Bible this morning, we’re going to see that embracing three things will help us find greater meaning in our work. They are that God’s saving work is the foundation for our work; God gives our work great dignity; and God guides how we work. Let’s get started. If you’ve got a Bible, please turn to Ephesians chapter 2, Ephesians 2.

##### **C. We are discussing all types of work**

Now as you’re turning to Ephesians, let me mention that as we discuss work this morning, we’re talking about all types of work that contributes to the common good of humanity. So to give an extreme negative example, we’re not talking about sex trafficking, for it does not contribute to the common good. However, we are talking about all jobs that contribute, along

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<sup>1</sup> Lines from Kevin Jones’ *When I Grow Up* video accessed on 4/23/14 at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olSIMc4j5Sg>

with chores, schoolwork, childrearing, volunteering in and outside the church, again any type of work that contributes to the common good. So whether you're going to school, making a home, looking for work, working a job, raising kids, or retired, you're part of this conversation.

## **I. God's saving work is the foundation for our work (Eph 2:1-10)**

### **A. We are blessed by God to bless others**

And the first point for us to embrace is that God's saving work is the foundation for our work. God's saving work is the foundation for our work. Please follow along with me as I read Ephesians 2, starting in verse 1.

<sup>1</sup> As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. <sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Now, verses 1-3 remind us that we were once dead in our sins, deserving only God's wrath. But God, who is rich in mercy, sent His son to die for our sins and rise from the dead. Look at how verse 7 describes the glorious future of everyone who trusts in Jesus – in the coming ages God will show us the incomparable riches of His grace. What a privilege to be in relationship with God. And as verses 8 and 9 remind us; our favor with God is a gift, not based on anything we've done.

So why has God given us such favor? Verse 10 explains. "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." One reason God gives us such incredible blessing is for us to bless others. Every Christian is created in Christ Jesus to do good works. And some of those good works include things like loving our family and volunteering. But those good works also include the many hours you spend at work

or school. God is not only the God of our Sunday mornings. He has prepared good works for us throughout the week.

### **B. Work is not the source of our identity**

And as we do these good works, it is important to remember the order of Ephesians 2. The starting point and foundation for our work is our relationship with God. Remembering this can protect us from putting too much importance on our work. You see, we don't have to do a ton of good works trying to appease God, for we are already accepted by God because of Jesus' perfect work. Further, you don't have to find your identity in the kind of work you do, or how much money you make, or how successful you are.

Listen to the wisdom of Pastor Craig Barnes, "you cannot determine who you are by what you do... There is no such thing as a self-constructed life. There is only being in Christ, or there is nothingness that others create for us."<sup>2</sup> Our identity is not in our work, it is in Jesus. Hypothetically speaking, let's say you fail out of school or get fired from your job because you really messed up. It'd be fine to be really disappointed, and even to think, you had a failure. However, it would not be biblical to say **you**'re a failure, as if your work or school defines you as a person. No, your identity comes from being God's child.

## **II. God gives our work great dignity (Gen 1-2; Col 3:22-24)**

### **A. God works and designed us to work**

Now although our work does not define us, it does matter. And to find greater meaning in our work, we must also embrace that God gives our work great dignity. God gives our work great dignity.

Pastor Tim Keller notes that the Bible begins talking about work as soon as it starts talking about anything – that's how important and basic work is. In Genesis 1 and 2 we see God described as working, as He creates the heavens and earth. And not only does God work; He commissions Adam and Eve to work on His behalf. In Genesis 1 God blesses them and says, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." And in Genesis 2 God gives them a garden to cultivate. Work was marred by the Fall, but work itself is not a curse. God designed work to be an important part of our lives. For work was even part of

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet*, 8, 10.

paradise.<sup>3</sup> In the words of Pastor Dave, “Work is a good four letter word.” And as Tim Keller describes it, “According to the Bible, we don’t merely need the money from work to survive; we need the work itself to survive and to live fully human lives.”<sup>4</sup>

**B. Does all work really matter?**

Now you might agree that some kinds of work matter. But does all work really matter?

**i. Jeff’s response illustrates the pull to minimize certain work**

This question hit home for me when I worked at an accounting firm. I was an external auditor, part of a team that would go out to various businesses, examine their financial statements, and then create a report with our opinion about their financials. God bless anyone here who loves auditing, but I did not particularly enjoy examining company records, creating auditing workpapers, or relating with individuals who did not like you checking their work for errors and giving them extra tasks.

So one day on the job, as I’m spreading all kinds of joy and good cheer as I audit others, I check my personal email. There’s an update from a missionary friend. As I read about her team’s exploits as they lead college students to Christ, and disciple them, I become bummed out. For in comparison, my auditing seemed unimportant and lacking impact. Now some of you might think external auditing work matters because its white collar work that requires a college degree, has good job security, and pays well. But whatever our differing criteria, we can tend to think that certain types of work don’t matter. So, does all work really matter?

**ii. Luther’s illustration (via Keller) shows the importance of all work**

Pastor Tim Keller answers this question with a helpful illustration from Martin Luther.<sup>5</sup> In the Lord’s Prayer we ask God to “give us this day our daily bread.” And in Psalm 145 it says that God feeds every one of us. So, how does God feed us? Luther noted that it is through the work of others that God feeds us and takes care of our other needs. To Luther, the simple milkmaid of his day did vital work for God. In fact, Luther described the milkmaid as the very “fingers of God” as she worked to feed others. And so all work, paid or unpaid, prestigious or lowly, “secular” or “spiritual”, it all matters if it contributes to the common good of humanity.

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<sup>3</sup> Tim Keller (with Katherine Leary Alsdorf), *Every Good Endeavor*, 33- 43.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>5</sup> I heard this in a Keller sermon on the subject of work. I do not recall the sermon’s title.

Now some of us do work where it's pretty easy to see how it contributes to the common good. Others of us, like external auditors, have to think it through a bit more. Either way, it's important to understand how your work contributes to the common good. Otherwise, it's tempting to reduce your job to merely being a paycheck, or something you endure just to have fun on the weekend, both of which are unbiblical ways to view one's work.

So, when I read that email from my missionary friend, how should have I thought about my auditing work? I should have recognized that God gives both missionary and auditing work great dignity. Now part of the dignity in my auditing came from the ability to support my family, the church, and the poor through my income, as well as taking opportunities to share the gospel. I don't want to minimize any of those wonderful gifts.

However, those are not the only ways God gives dignity to auditing. For although some do not like being checked up on, external auditors contribute to the common good. Publicly traded companies are legally required to get audits, so auditors provide those companies an essential service. Additionally, auditors help companies stay out of trouble by helping them follow required guidelines and by finding fraud. Further, when auditors fail to do their jobs, situations can take place like the one at Enron in the early 2000s, when many lost jobs and huge portions of their retirement savings. For our work and economy to flourish, we need trust. And without auditors to examine companies' financial statements, the public could not trust what management reports about a company's earnings. And without that trust, our stock market and economy could not flourish.

So for all these reasons, and others, external auditing matters. Now like most industries in this fallen world, there is some bad that comes with the good in auditing. However, like the milkmaid in Luther's illustration, auditors serve as the very "fingers of God" as they do their work, contributing to our common good and flourishing.

And if you're still not sure that "secular" work like auditing matters, I invite you to think back to paradise. God did not hand Adam and Eve instruments and tell them to start a praise band, no offense Jacob :) No, God invites them to rule and to cultivate a garden. Further, Jesus spent the majority of His adult years as a carpenter.

### **iii. Sidebar on slavery**

Now let's turn to Colossians 3, which also shows that God gives our work great dignity. We're about to read Colossians 3, verses 22-24, which give instructions to slaves. Now when we

hear slaves, we think of the horrific slavery of America. And one might mistakenly think that the Bible endorses this kind of slavery since it gives instructions to slaves. However, as many scholars have noted, slavery in the first century was not exactly the same as slavery in America. Some first century slaves chose to become slaves temporarily to pay off large debts, some slaves held esteemed positions like that of a doctor or professor, and some were paid equal wages to free workers. Now I don't want to paint an overly rosy picture of first century slavery, only make the point that did not have the same across the board injustices as slavery in America. Further, the New Testament radically elevated the status of slaves, for it taught that slaves were equal to masters in God's eyes and that masters were to treat slaves as brothers in Christ. In fact, these biblical truths caused Christians to lead the charge in abolishing the horrible race-based slavery we had in this country.

#### **iv. We work directly for Jesus**

So, having clarified that the Bible does not endorse the terrible injustices of slavery, we're ready to read Colossians 3, verses 22-24. <sup>22</sup> Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. <sup>23</sup> Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, <sup>24</sup> since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Now our work is not exactly the same as that of slaves, so we can't apply all the particulars of this passage. However, there are principles here that do apply and give our work great dignity. Look again at verse 23 with me. Notice that the slaves are working for the Lord. Now some first century slaves had pretty decent work situations. However, others did what we'd consider very menial work in very harsh conditions. And yet they are all said to be working for the Lord. Even the lowliest slave has a calling from God in his work. And so in your work, you too have a calling as you work directly for King Jesus Himself.

#### **v. Work is a preparation and test for your kingdom stewardship**

Now look at verse 24. Here we see that we can receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward for faithful work. Our work today is incredibly important, for it is a preparation and a test for what you will steward in Christ's coming kingdom. Now we don't have time for an in-depth examination of the New Testament rewards passages. However, when you study them, two themes keep coming up regarding our rewards, 1) special intimacy with God and 2) the

glory of ruling with Christ in His kingdom. And our level of faithfulness in our work will help determine our rewards. So your choices at work have profound implications, impacting your intimacy level with God and your service in His coming kingdom. And who knows, perhaps the privilege of working with Jesus will continue for all eternity. After all, we're made in the image of a working God, work was part of the original paradise, and we'll labor in Christ's coming kingdom.

Author Andy Crouch reflects on the possibility, noting, "The most plausible answer, it seems to me, is that our eternal life in God's recreated world will be the fulfillment of what God originally asked us to do: cultivating and creating in full and lasting relationship with our creator. This time, of course, we will not just be tending a garden; we will be sustaining the life of a city, a harmonious human society that has developed all the potentialities hidden in the original creation to their fullest."<sup>6</sup>

### **III. God must guide how we work (Col 3:22-24)**

#### **A. Work Christianly**

Now not only does God give our work great dignity, God must also guide how we work. God must guide how we work. Look again at the end of verse 24. "It is the Lord Christ you are serving." In all our work we ultimately serve Jesus. And this means we must work Christianly, doing God's work in God's way. Now working Christianly includes certain basics for all of us. From verse 22 we see that we are to work with integrity, whether our boss is around or not. And verse 22 also shows we are to work worshipfully, with a reverence towards God.

And from verse 23 we see we are to work hard. Remember, this passage is speaking to slaves. So it's not saying work hard only once you like your job, boss and compensation. Generally speaking, it's fine to seek better employment or flee from a toxic work environment. However, as long as you stay in a work situation, whether paid or unpaid, work hard. For Jesus always deserves a good day of work. And given Paul's instructions here, I bet when he made someone a tent, he honored God by working hard to make his customer a quality tent.

Look now at verse 24. This verse reminds us that one day Jesus will return. And this means that part of working Christianly is working with hope. For even when you're stuck for years in a profession you dislike, or you must lay others off, or you pour your heart into a project that fails, you can hold onto hope in the midst of your pain. For verse 24 reminds us that one day

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<sup>6</sup> Andy Crouch, *Culture Making*, 173.

Jesus will return. And when He does, Jesus will fully redeem everything, including the brokenness of our work and lives.

Now in the book of Titus Paul gives similar instructions to slaves as he does here in Colossians 3. But in Titus 2 Paul notes one added benefit to working Christianly is that it makes Jesus attractive. Think of the impact if you and any other Christians at your school or workplace worked with impeccable integrity, heartfelt worship, amazing diligence, and an unshakable hope. What an incredible witness that would be for Jesus. And what incredible blessing we could bring our city.

Now to work Christianly includes common traits, but it will look a little different in our various vocations and work environments. To work Christianly in advertising is not exactly the same as working Christianly in health care. To work Christianly as the owner of a business is not exactly the same as working Christianly as an employee. And I know many of you deal with gray areas in your work that require praying, searching the Scriptures, and considering wisdom from those who know the Bible and your profession. Although we can't discuss the specifics of working Christianly in all our callings, I'd like to share a story that encourages the right mindset.

#### **B. Bradley's discussion with a student illustrates a Christian mindset**

Dr. Anthony Bradley is a professor at King's College in New York. And one day he went on a long bus ride with some of his students to a conference. And on the way he talks with a student, who's excited about his mergers and acquisitions internship at a prestigious firm in New York City. So Dr. Bradley asks him why he likes mergers and acquisitions so much. And the student says it is fun, interesting work to him. Dr. Bradley presses further, asking, "But why do you care about mergers and acquisitions?" And the student again talks about how it is enjoyable, and it's a respected field that pays really well. As Dr. Bradley continues engaging with the student, he realizes that although his student is a very intelligent Christian studying at a very Christian university, he does not understand biblical work. For the student thought his work was all about him, the enjoyment, money, and status he could have. So Dr. Bradley tried to help him embrace a biblical view. That it's okay, as a secondary priority, to be excited about enjoyable work that pays well. But that he must remember that all work has a social dimension to it. That a big reason God gives us work is so that we can bless others as we contribute to the common good. Dr. Bradley asked him, do you realize that as your team shifts numbers on a spreadsheet, there are real people whose lives will be profoundly affected? That someone may

lose a house, or no longer be able to send a kid to college. Dr. Bradley explained that mergers and acquisitions was a position of stewardship, helping the marketplace be more efficient in the use of God's resources so that people can flourish. The student looked down and said, "Huh, I've never really thought of it that way."<sup>7</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

#### **A. To find greater meaning in work, embrace three things**

Well I hope, by God's grace, you're starting to think of your work in this biblical sort of way. Imagine its tomorrow morning, and you're doing whatever work you do on Mondays. What would need to change for you to do that work for the Lord?

We've seen this morning that to find greater meaning in our work, we must embrace three things. That God's saving work is the foundation for our work; that God gives our work great dignity; and that God must guide how we work.

#### **B. Port-o-potty story illustrates how to find meaning in work**

To close I'd like to share a story from Pastor Andy Stanley about a man who lived out these truths. Stanley has a close friend named Bob, who is a homebuilder. And one day, Bob and his crew are pouring the driveway for a new house. And Bob's in a foul mood as he reflects on some challenges he's experiencing as a homebuilder. And then things get worse. Bob sees the port-o-potty cleaning guy drive up. And the port-o-potty is right next to where Bob's working, and when it's cleaned, it creates an incredibly vile smell on the worksite. Talk about a job that no child dreams of doing when they grow up. Now Bob notices that it's a new port-o-potty cleaning guy, and he's in there forever working on it with all these tools as Bob braces for the horrible smell. But instead a pleasant smell comes, and so Bob walks over to the guy and says, "Hey, you've got that thing smelling so good it kinda makes me want to go in there." And the man says "The guy who has been servicing you has been doing a terrible job, but don't worry, I'll take care of you from here on out." And so Bob says thanks to him. And then the guy says, "I work for the Lord" as he picks up his tools, walks down the driveway, and drives off.<sup>8</sup>

Let's pray...

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<sup>7</sup> Anthony Bradley lecture entitled *Work as a Means to Social Shalom* accessed on 4/22/14 at <http://www.faithandwork.org/work-as-a-means-to-social-shalom/>

<sup>8</sup> Andy Stanley sermon entitled *Taking Care of Business Part 1* accessed on 4/22/14 at <https://myspace.com/fullquiver3d/video/-taking-care-of-business-part-1-by-andy-stanley/38488001>

To close our service, I'd like to invite everyone to stand at this time as I ask God to bless your work this week, using verse 17 of Psalm 90.

“May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us – yes establish the work of our hands.” Amen. You're dismissed.