

It's not just a job

1 in a series "Take this job and love it"

Sermon for Sunday, August 22, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 2:11, 20-23; Romans 12:1;
Colossians 3:23

1) How some view their work

One of my favourite cartoons is Dilbert. (For the uninitiated, Dilbert works as an engineer in a large corporation.)

One of the keys to humour is that we see ourselves in it. We chuckle because we think, "Yeah, I know just what you mean." This is certainly the case with Dilbert. Many of his best cartoons are drawn from real life, from letters sent in by readers describing the companies they work for. Like the one who said her boss developed the theory that that if you cut costs deep enough (i.e. get rid of all your employees), you can still make a profit even though you sell only one or two things.

Back in the early 1990s when so many companies were downsizing and laying off staff, one company developed a new program known as *SGE*, which stood for "Strengthening Global Enterprise." The staff knew better and renamed it "Say Goodbye Everyone."

These little stories illustrate the idea felt by many people, that working at a job is a painful but necessary part of life, something to be endured if we want to have food and shelter. In fact, a verse in the Bible seems to support that point of view. In the Garden of Eden, as punishment for eating the forbidden fruit, God tells the man he will have to work extra hard for his living:

Genesis 3:17-19, Today's English Version:

"Because of what you have done, the ground will be under a curse. You will have to work hard all your life to make it produce enough food for you. It will produce weeds and thorns, and you will have to eat wild plants. You will have to work hard and sweat to make the soil produce anything."

In that passage, work is part of a curse!

That's an example of taking just one part of the Bible in isolation from the rest of the Bible. The truth is, the Bible says that work is indeed from God, but that it's part of God's plan for blessing us and helping us grow.

Today, as we lead up to Labour Day, I'm beginning a new sermon series on work.

This topic applies to all of us. You may be a student, but we're all still learning. You may be a full-time homemaker, but I'm sure you have some choice words for anyone who suggests you don't work. You may be unemployed: you know the value of work more than anyone. You may be retired, but most of you tell me that you're just as busy now as you ever were; the only difference is, you're not getting paid for it.

2) Work is the means to an end

King Solomon of Israel wrote the book of Ecclesiastes towards the end of his reign. He looks back over his life, and reflects on the mistakes he made, and what he has learned about life. This is part of what he wrote about work:

Ecclesiastes 2:11, 20-23, New Living Translation:

As I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless. It was like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere. ...

So I turned in despair from hard work. It was not the answer to my search for satisfaction in this life. For though I do my work with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, I must leave everything I gain to people who haven't worked to earn it. This is not only foolish but highly unfair. So what do people get for all their hard work? Their days of labour are filled with pain and grief; even at night they cannot rest. It is all utterly meaningless.

What discouraging words! How would you like to come to the end of your life only to conclude, "As I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless"?!?

This is what happens when people live for their work. Many of you know someone who worked long and hard at their job, and were very good at it. But when they retired, they had no hobbies, no interests, nothing useful to do with their time. And they were dead within a year.

An businessman was walking along a pier in a small coastal Mexican village when a boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the boat were several large, yellow-fin tuna. The businessman complimented the fisherman on the quality of the fish. He asked how long it took to catch them.

The man said, "Only a little while."

The businessman then asked why he didn't stay out longer and catch more fish. The fisherman said he had enough to support his family's needs.

The businessman then asked how he spends the rest of his day.

The fisherman replied, “I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a siesta with my wife, stroll into the village each evening where I play the guitar with my friends. I have a full and busy life, señor.”

The businessman scoffed, “I’m a Harvard MBA, and I could really help you. The way I see it, you should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the bigger boat, you could buy several boats, and perhaps an entire fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middle-man, you could sell directly to the processor and even open your own cannery. Then you could control the product, processing and distribution. You would leave this small coastal village and move to Mexico City, and then L.A. and eventually New York City, where you’ll run your entire enterprise.”

The fisherman asked, “But señor, how long will all this take?”

The businessman replied, “15-20 years.”

“But what then?”

The businessman laughed and said, “That’s the best part! When the time is right, you would announce that your company is going public and sell all your stock and you’d become a rich millionaire.”

“Millions? Then what?” the man said.

The businessman said, “Then you’d retire, move to a small coastal village where you could sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take a siesta with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could play your guitar with your amigos.”

Work is only a means to an end; it is not the end in itself. When work becomes the most important thing, it has become our god. That kind of work leads only to emptiness and grief.

What is meaning of work, then?

3) Work is worship

Romans 12:1, Today’s English Version:
Because of God’s great mercy to us I appeal to you:
Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer.

According to the Bible, our whole lives are worship offered to God. Let’s do a little math. Add up how many hours in a week you spend at church. Now add up how many hours in a week you spend working. The Bible teaches us that both of those count as worship. *All of life* is to be worship.

Author Gordon MacDonald put it this way, “Too many pastors preach as if the ultimate reality is inside the church. We ought to preach to prepare people to go back into the workplace. Preaching should be like the pit crew in a race — the focus should be on getting them back into the race.”

4) God is your boss

The most common questions people ask when they are talking about their work are:

- What do you do?
- Where do you work?
- How much do you make?

The question that God asks us is, “How do you work?” In other words, do you do it grudgingly or cheerfully? Do you give it all you’ve got, or do you slack off and do just enough to get by? How do you treat others: the boss, your colleagues, those you supervise, and customers?

Colossians 3:23, New Living Translation:

Work hard and cheerfully at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.

Stop right now and think about that. Picture the work that you do (like I said earlier, this applies to all of us, whatever our situation). Now imagine that you have to answer to God for how you do your job.

In Nevil Shute’s novel *Round the Bend*, a man named Connie is sent to be the chief engineer of an aircraft company operating in Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. The work ethic was poor, maintenance on the airplanes was spotty and, as you might imagine, breakdowns were frequent. It was very expensive to run a business like that. Connie spoke to the mechanics about how their work and their religion were tied together.

“We are a peculiar people, we who care for airplanes. For common men it is enough to pray five times in each day as is ordained in the Koran. But we are different, we mechanics. We are called to a higher task than common men, and Allah will require much more from us than that. We are men of understanding and of education, on whom is laid responsibility that people may travel in these aeroplanes as safely as if they were sitting by the well in the cool of the evening.

“With every piece of work you do, with every nut you tighten down, with every filter that you clean or every tappet that you set, pause at each stage and turn to Mecca, and fold your hands, and humbly ask the All-Seeing God to put into your heart the knowledge whether the work that you have done has been good or ill. Then you are to stand for half a minute with your eyes cast down, thinking of God and of the job, and God will put into your heart the knowledge of good or ill. So if the work is good you may proceed in peace, and if it is ill you may do it over again, or come to me and I will help you to do well before God.

“If you do this, you will soon find that you are praying to God forty-five times a day or more.”

This airline soon had the best safety record in the entire Middle East, and became a very profitable business. The word among the public was that this was *the* airline to fly with.

Can you apply that to your work, whatever that may be? Of course you can! The real question is, will you? Will you allow God to be Lord over all your life, not just an hour on Sunday? What would you need to change in order to make that a reality? May God grant you wisdom and courage as you do this.

Theme for today: When people talk about work, one of the most important issues is “How much do you earn?” The most important thing that God looks at is “How do you do your work?”