

The Joy of Work Completed

Sermon shared by Melvin Newland

September 1992

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Melvin Newland

A. This is Labour Day weekend, & I come to it with mixed emotions because I'm not sure exactly what to do with this particular holiday.

All year long we gear up for holidays. For Christmas we try to get in the spirit of giving. For New Years we try to get in the spirit of new beginnings. For the 4th of July we get all patriotic. For Thanksgiving we try to get ourselves in a thankful mood. But what are we supposed to do for Labour Day? If we are honouring work, shouldn't we go to work an hour early on Labour Day & say to our boss, "I'm so thankful for work that I'm here early? I'll work all day & late tonight, & I don't even want to be paid for it, because I enjoy my work so much."

Well, we certainly won't volunteer to do anything like that, will we? Instead, most of us expect to have the day off with pay. But somehow that just doesn't fit the pattern of how we honour the other holidays.

B. Statistics reveal that if we live to retirement, that as an employee we will have worked nearly 90,000 hours of our life. Now multiply that out, & it comes to over 45 years of 40-hour weeks, 50 weeks a year minus national holidays. We will have spent that much time at our job, & that is a large slice of life. Put that together with the fact that most people don't really care about their jobs, & they look at their work as something to be endured rather than enjoyed. So it is no wonder that Labour Day weekend comes along & we're not really sure what we should be honouring.

ILL. I heard a story that probably has more truth than fiction. It is about an employer who brought his employees in once a month for a pep talk. He would inform them of the future plans of the company, & try to excite them about their work so that they would be enthusiastic about what they were doing.

On one occasion he called them in & said, "We have just purchased a bunch of robots. And these robots will free you from some of the menial things you have been doing in the past, tightening screws, & so on."

Instantly he sensed from the expressions on their faces that they were concerned about job security. So quickly he added, "Now don't worry about your jobs. Nobody is going to lose a job as a result of these robots. There will be some reduction in the work force, but that will be taken care of through retirement & natural attrition. You'll all keep your jobs."

"In fact," he said, "this will even work to your advantage. As we perfect the work of these robots you will probably not even have to work a full 40-hour week, & you can take a day off now & then with no reduction in pay."

He said, "As we get this system perfected even more, maybe you can have two days off. You'll only have to work 3 days a week. In fact, our ultimate goal is that the time will come when you will only come in one day a week, on Wednesdays. That will be it, & you'll still get your full salary."

One of the employees in the back row raised his hand. He had a question. "Sir, will we have to come in every Wednesday?"

PROP. I think Labour Day should remind us that work is a blessing, & not a curse. So this morning I want to talk about work as a blessing. I want to talk about work as service. Finally, I want to suggest that work is not enough.

I. WORK IS A BLESSING

A. In Genesis 2:2 we read, "By the 7th day God had finished the work He had been doing; so on the 7th day He rested from all His work. And God blessed the 7th day & made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work of creating that He had done."

That tells us that God is a worker, & we have been created in His image.

Vs. 7 says, "And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground & breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, & man became a living being."

Vs. 15 says, "The Lord God took the man & put him in the Garden of Eden to work it & take care of it."

Now understand, this is before the fall of man. This is before sin appeared in the world. God gave man, as a part of the blessing of Paradise, the privilege of working the garden & caring for it.

Can you imagine what it would have been like to take care of the Garden of Eden before the fall? All Adam had to do was plant & prune & pick.

B. Then Adam & Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. We read the result of their fall in the 3rd chapter, beginning with vs. 17.

"To Adam He said, 'Because you listened to your wife & 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 & thistles for you, & 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 & to dust you will return.'"

But did you notice? The curse is not work. The curse is the thorns & thistles & pain & death. The curse is blood & sweat & tears, not work.

ILL. Every year some of you become enthusiastic gardeners. You grab your hoes, & with a whistle on your lips, you turn over the ground & plant the seeds. You just know that this will be your year to have a bumper crop of all those great vegetables you love to eat freshly picked from the garden.

But it is not long until weeds have come, & bugs are eating away at your delicate plants, & you're sweating profusely, & you begin to lose your enthusiasm for

gardening.

Work can be fun. But when you put work together with thorns & thistles & other parts of the curse, then it often is not much fun anymore.

ILL. I think many people would like to be in the ministry if it weren't for the thorns & thistles in it. If everybody got along with each other, & nobody ever got sick or died, & nobody ever had any trouble, & we didn't ever have to raise money for new buildings, they would think that this is the greatest line of work in all the world. If all we had to do was to preach sermons, & never had to go through the work of preparing them, this would be a great job.

Maybe it is the same in your line of work. If you didn't have a disgruntled boss always looking over your shoulder, if you didn't have co-workers with whom you don't get along, if you didn't have projects that were so hard, your work would be the most enjoyable thing in the world.

Work without thorns & thistles is fun. But when you put the thorns & thistles in, then it becomes a burden, doesn't it?

C. When God first made man He blessed him, & made him a partner with God in caring for & tending the Garden. The Bible teaches us that we are also partners with God in the work that we do. In some vocations that is more obvious than in others.

ILL. Think about a farmer. Farmers work hand in hand with God. Farmers this past summer, during a severe drought, learned that lesson all over again. We depend upon God, for we are in a partnership with Him.

In the ministry, all I can do is sow the seed & then wait on the Lord to give the increase. A doctor can perform surgery & remove diseased parts of the body, but then he must wait on the Lord to do the work of healing. And it is probably the same way in your work, too.

D. I think that a most fulfilling part of life comes in knowing that you have worked hand in hand with God, & are fulfilling His will, doing what God has called you to do.

But some of the saddest words in the Bible are those words of Jesus when He looked at the people who were coming to Him, & He said, "The fields are white unto harvest, but the labourers are few." There is always plenty of work, but there just never seems to be enough labourers.

II. WORK SHOULD BE A SERVICE

A. Secondly, work should be a service. Jesus was a carpenter, & He spent the first 30 years of His life in a carpentry shop. He knew what it was to have callused hands & sore muscles. He knew how to swing a hammer & use a saw & make something with his hands that would be of benefit to others.

He probably made yoke for oxen to make it easier for them to pull the plow & for the farmer to get his work done. He probably made tables & chairs where families could sit & eat & laugh & enjoy each other's friendship & love. His labor was used to serve others, to make life a bit better for them.

B. That is the work of the church too, isn't it? There are people who need to be brought to the saving power of the cross, to be redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus, & to receive that life which will never end.

One of the hardest problems I have in the ministry is knowing when to help someone, & when not to help. A steady stream of people come by, wanting money. Sometimes they want food or a tank of gasoline or a place to sleep. And I always wonder, "What's the best thing to do?"

It'd be nice to have an unlimited supply of money to pass out to everybody who asks. But the longer I'm in the ministry, the more I realize that's usually the worst thing you can do for someone, just to give them anything they ask for. So how do we solve that problem? When should we help, & when would it be a greater service to say "No"?

C. I am not sure that there is an easy answer. But I have found something helpful to me. You see, both the Bible & life itself teach us that people are poor for different reasons.

1. For instance, some are poor because of calamity. Maybe they have been victims of a flood or tornado, or their home has been destroyed & they have lost all their possessions. Maybe they are handicapped physically or mentally & can't provide for themselves.

Jesus had compassion for the blind & the lame & the paralyzed & those stricken with leprosy. And here Christians need to be of service, too.

2. Others are poor because of oppression, man's inhumanity to man, cruelty & abuse. Here, too, there is need for Christian ministry. We must reach out & in the name of Jesus help to alleviate the suffering.

3. Some people are poor because of their service to God. Missionaries & ministers & doctors & nurses have gone to the uttermost parts of the world. They have left behind family & material possessions. They have said, "I'll go wherever God wants me to go, & I'll do whatever God wants me to do." They have an amazing faith that we admire.

That is a part of the ministry of the church, to reach out to people like that, to support them & enable them to carry on their labour for God.

4. But there is another area of poverty. It is caused by sloth, by laziness, by not being willing to work. The Book of Proverbs is full of proverbs that deal with lazy people. And the advice that is given to people who won't work is that they should learn from the activities of the ant.

One almost humorous passage says, "The sluggard looks out his window & he says, 'There is a lion in the street, & therefore I can't go to work today.'" Anybody who reads that passage must realize that there wasn't a lion in the street. He was in the middle of a city. Lions don't run up & down the middle of a city. But any excuse is good enough if you don't want to go to work.

Oftentimes people come begging, asking for handouts, but when work is mentioned, you quickly discover that they have no desire to work.

Jesus called the servant who took the one talent & buried it a "wicked & slothful" or lazy servant. Paul takes one look at his world, & in 2 Thessalonians 3 says, "If you don't work, you don't eat."

As Christians we have a ministry to those who are poor because of calamity or oppression or their service for God. But we must not give hand outs to people who are not willing to work.

III. WORK IS NOT ENOUGH

A. Finally this, work is not enough.

It never is. There are some who are workaholics, who think that if they can just get a little more & buy a little more, they will have found the secret to happiness in life as well.

But it just doesn't work that way. If you work & do not rest, you miss one of the greatest blessings of all. We are created in God's image, & the Bible says that after God completed the work of creation, He rested & made the 7th day holy as a day of rest.

Sometimes we need to sit back & relax & enjoy God's creation, refreshing ourselves so that we can go back to work with renewed energy.

B. There is a great passage in Ecclesiastes 5:12. It says, "The sleep of the labourer is sweet whether he eats little or much." I like that. I am finding as I get older that if I eat too much too late, I don't sleep very well. But it says here that if you are a good labourer your sleep is sweet.

How often have you had the satisfaction of knowing that you have done a job well, seen it through, & now it's finally over? If you have known that experience, you know what he is talking about.

He says, "Your sleep is sweet." I was going to add "like the sleep of a baby," but I'm relearning as a grandfather that not all babies sleep that well at night. But sleep is sweet when work is finished.

C. One of these days you & I will stand before the heavenly Father, & He'll look us straight in the eye & will say one of two things. Either "Depart from me, I have never known you," or "Well done, good & faithful servant. You have been faithful in a few things. I will now give you charge of many."

Eternity will be sweet for the labourer who has worked in harmony with God, & has finished the task set before him. Jesus completed His task on earth. He went to the cross & died as a sacrifice for our sins.

Now it is up to us to accept that sacrifice, & to serve Him faithfully the rest of our life. Will you? We extend the invitation of the Lord this morning, & pray that you will respond as we stand & as we sing.