

The Family Business

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It's Labor Day, and this is a sermon about work. If you are retired and thinking that a sermon about work has nothing to do with you, think again! We're going to see that the Creator of the universe has lifelong work for you that is independent of any label you might wear, whether that label is engineer, executive, stay at home parent, teacher, nurse, doctor or retired. It's as if God is running a family business, and he has a spot in the business that only you can fill.

A lot of this material comes out of my sabbatical last summer where I looked at the theology of work, and a lot of this comes from my background. I was in higher education for 10 years and in the high tech industry for 10 years. Although I don't have a technical background, my technology "claim to fame" is that I was the editor of a white paper on long data block which increased the data block size from 512 bytes to 4K. And I'm now beginning my 9th year at SFC.

Let's look at a biblical view of work.

God is first introduced to us in Genesis 1:1 as creator and worker. There was darkness and a void, and God's light and creation burst forth from that darkness and emptiness.

We read in Genesis 1, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." The scriptures go on to tell of God's creation day by day. And then we read in Genesis 2, "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation."

We often think that work, labor or toil comes out of the fall, but work is the primary task given to Adam; Adam is to release the potential of God's creation even as he cares for it. Genesis 2:15: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it."

Work is not a result of sin. It is part of God's original design for humanity. Some translations may use the "cultivate" in Genesis 2:15 in place of "work." The word in Hebrew means work or service. The word "keep" carries the idea of care or protection. God put Adam in the garden of Eden to work it and to care for it.

Work is what we were created for. God created us to work. Theologians call Genesis 1:27-28 the "cultural mandate":

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them (man and woman) have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Adam and Eve's dominion over the garden was to expand into dominion over the whole earth. God didn't just intend for them to have babies and plant trees. They were meant to exercise dominion over all of creation, turning the entire earth into a showcase of the glory and beauty and majesty of God and then working it and caring for it for all of eternity.

So work was God's design from the beginning, and the ultimate goal was for every aspect of life and culture to be saturated with the beauty and glory and love of God.

God created the world as a work of art. Work is not a curse. If the world was perfect, there would still be work. We were made for work, but because of the fall, our work has become labor. We now face the effects of the fall, where thorns and thistles populate the ground. In

Genesis 3, we read, “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; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.”

Humanity turned away from God. We want to be our own boss. Work is broken. Now thorns and thistles appear. We can get work done but with frustration.

Because of the fall, we often think of work as a curse. But it’s vital to realize that work preceded the fall. Work is not a result of humankind’s fall into sin. Work is a gift from God. Work is something we were built for, something our loving Creator intends for our good.

Work is not evil, nor is it a side effect of sin. This truth can be hard for us to trust when we are frustrated in our jobs. It’s certainly true that the fall brought toil and futility into work. Ever since, our experience of work involves pain as well as pleasure, but work itself is good. It has intrinsic value.

And work is a theme that finds expression throughout the Bible. Work is an intrinsic part of the way the biblical story unfolds: it describes the first big construction project – the ark. It shows us Abraham as a wealthy herdsman, Joseph as manager under Potiphar and Pharaoh, Moses as leader, Jethro as consultant, Joshua as general, David as shepherd and Jesus as carpenter.

Work is more than an ends to a means. The picture of God throughout scripture is of a creator and redeemer actively at work. Colossians 1:15-22 presents a view of God at work. In this passage, Paul is speaking about Jesus, and he says this:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to

dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

This sure sounds like work to me. We see God as creator, holding all things together. Jesus is at work reconciling all things, but we suffer from the sacred-secular divide, where we often live as if God is interested only in those aspects of our lives that revolve around church. We start to believe that God is more interested in how we serve at church than how we serve our coworkers. We start to believe that God is more interested in our Life Group than our soccer league. Life Groups, gathering together at church are important, but it's not either/or. It is both/and.

In Colossians 1, Paul affirms that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation: for by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible like elephants and bananas, and invisible like electricity and subatomic particles; all things were created by him and for him. In this passage, we see a couple of reasons for Jesus' abiding interest in the material world: he created it; it was created for him. If all things were created by and for Christ, why wouldn't he be interested in the impact that our activities in the kitchen, at school, in factories, fields and offices have on his creation? Too often we segment our lives.

There is church, and there is work. There is church, and there is leisure. There is church, and there is home. We think of life as existing in segments much like an orange. This view of a segmented life encourages the sacred-secular divide. We start to believe certain segments of our life are really important to God – prayer, church services, small groups – but others aren't – work, school, sport, the arts, music, rest, sleep, hobbies. The sacred-secular divide leads us to believe that really holy people become missionaries, moderately holy people become pastors and people who are not much use to God get a job. Absolutely false! When I left high tech and started working for the church, so many people said to me,

“How wonderful you are doing God’s work now.” as if my work in high tech wasn’t – couldn’t possibly - be God’s work. Sometimes it feels like there are two classes of Christians: full-time Christian workers and those who aren’t.

But let’s change the metaphor of life as an orange and think of life as a peach where all life is a whole.

When we buy into the lie of the sacred-secular divide, we start to believe that the only full-time Christian workers are pastors and missionaries. We view evangelism as bringing our neighbor to church, so the pastor can convert them. But look at this graphic: if the red dots represent believers, and the box represents our community, our workplace, our neighborhood, only a very few will have any contact with a believer. Now, if we change our understanding of a full-time Christian worker to anyone who calls Jesus their savior, we see that the gospel goes forth into our community. Many more people have contact with a believer, someone who is part of God’s work – a unique worker in the family business.

I confess that I too have bought into the lie of the sacred-secular divide. When I was still in the hard drive business, my job focus changed, and I was asked to write about the difference between hard drives and flash drives. I could not see what this had to do with God’s kingdom. I started asking God, “Is this really the best use of my time and talent?” Wrong question! Right question: “God, what do you want to accomplish? How can I come along side the work you are already doing?” As it turned out, there were extreme tensions in my office. In fact, it got so bad that the organization had to seek a restraining order against one employee. Prayer was needed. Shalom was needed.

In the Old Testament, when God’s people have been carted off to be slaves in a pagan land, God tells them to seek the shalom of the city. The Hebrew concept of shalom relates to all of life. Its essential meaning is wholeness. The gospel is holistic. It affects all of life, and it affects every aspect of who we are. It affects our minds, our hearts and our labor because God calls us to love him with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength and all our minds. And to love our neighbor as ourselves. Even in a pagan environment.

Tim Keller has been writing quite a bit about the theology of work. He asks, "What's the Christian way to be a pilot? ... Land the plane." Not giving out tracts or singing hymns over the intercom. Sometimes being a full-time Christian worker at our jobs, where we work out, where we play, where we interact with others looks quite different than we may have envisioned it.

We live in a post-Christian society where many people we encounter don't have a background in church or in hearing about Jesus. We need to help create stories that will help them know who Jesus is. Keller points out, it's as if we are sitting at Starbucks and a man walks up and says, "The name of the common American duck is histrionicus" and walks on. Does this make sense to you? Because it doesn't fit our reality, we start trying to make sense of it. We try to fit it into our reality. We need to help people see how God fits into their story.

Every generation tends to focus on particular metaphors for the Christian life. In the past, we've placed great emphasis on the metaphors of salt and light from Matthew 5. Salt was seen as preserving, as arresting decay and adding savor. Light was understood as pointing to a different way and exposing evil. But Matthew 13 gives us another pair of parables: the mustard seed and yeast. The parable of the mustard seed shows us that little things can make a huge difference over time and can become welcome signs pointing a different way to the world. The parable of the yeast adds another vital dimension. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all the way through the dough. Yeast not only pervades the dough, yeast transforms it into something much tastier and much more satisfying - into bread. It takes very little yeast to turn flour into bread. It's not quantity that counts but impact. The Christian is intended to be an agent of transformation in the world. We are not simply there to arrest decay, to add savor, to expose sin. We are not simply there to show a different way. We are there to radically transform God's world. A small piece of yeast gives bread for a hundred people.

Small things can make a big difference. Let's practice one degree shifts. If we deviate by even one degree on a compass, we'll end up in a radically different place. Small gestures can have big impact. For example, a woman baked a cake each Friday to bring to work. People

started talking to each other and building relationships. She started to change the culture. She was being a “red dot” in her workplace. We often tell big, “red carpet” stories because they are exciting, but so are the stories we might call “red dot” stories. Let’s tell red dot stories where we see God at work even if it is bringing a cup of cold water in Jesus’ name.

If you are feeling like life is already too full and that every minute of every day is already committed and even overbooked, do not despair! I am not asking you to add anything to your day. I’m asking you to consider working differently. Each of us has a total of 168 hours in our week. We spend roughly 48 hours in sleep. Let’s say we spend 10 hours in church-related activities. That leaves 110 waking hours. How do we live out the gospel in that 110?

The fact that a Christian in work or school spends 50 hours a week represents a huge opportunity to build relationships. The fact that a 23-year-old who likes dancing spends eight hours a week in clubs represents a superb opportunity for relationship building. The fact that a stay-at-home parent with a child at a primary school has the scope to interact with up to 30 or so sets of parents for seven years is a wonderful opportunity to build relationships. The fact that an 80-year-old in a retirement home interacts several hours a day with other people of similar age represents a huge opportunity. When you understand that you are a full-time Christian worker regardless of your title, you view work, play and parenting differently. Apple had a great ad slogan. Remember it? Think different. Let’s think differently – holistically about work and life.

The sacred-secular divide does a profound disservice to God. It limits the apparent scope of his concern to a very narrow band of activities and thereby blinds us to his amazing love. We lose sight of how splendid he is. The sacred-secular divide makes us think that God is like a parent who is only interested in one aspect of our lives, such as our academic performance. Reducing God in this manner is like reducing Leonardo da Vinci to being solely the painter of the Mona Lisa. Yes, it’s a masterpiece, but if we base our assessment on Leonardo’s genius on one painting, we limit our appreciation. We’d be ignoring a number of other masterpieces, including the Last Supper and 13,000 pages of notes and drawings which bring together art and natural philosophy. We’d be ignoring his work as an engineer

and the extraordinary range of his inventions – musical instruments, hydraulic pumps and even a flying machine. Together that’s a whole lot more impressive than being the painter of even one of the world’s greatest pictures. How much more is that the case with our God? The more we appreciate the range of his loving interest, the more we appreciate his splendor and majesty. In fact our Father in heaven is interested in all of our life.

Paul reminds us in Colossians 1 of the comprehensive scope of Jesus’ work on the cross. God is working through Jesus to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Jesus calls his servants – Us! – to cooperate with him in making his world as much like he intends it to be before he returns. The prayer your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven is a prayer for today, even if it will only be fully realized in the future. Your kingdom come, your will be done in my office, my school, my gym, my home.

When we pray, “Your will be done,” we accept that Jesus wants to change us, wants to help us in every aspect of our life. God is helping us to turn difficult relationships into purposeful companionship; repetitive, even boring work into fruitful service for the king of the universe. God is transforming the ordinary. Jesus is not just an idea. He’s alive, transforming people’s lives today.

My mother has started noticing white cars whenever we drive. Until she pointed them out to me, I was blind to how many white cars are on the road. It’s also reminded me of how often I am blind to the work God is doing. Now, every time mother notices a white car, I look for where God is at work. How have I seen God’s hand at work? What is God teaching me? How is he changing me? What do I sense he might be doing here? How does my faith in the God for whom all things are possible change how I view this situation? I remember that God is at work, redeeming us, reconciling us.

When we look at God as worker, we see so many different types of work he is involved in:

God Redeems. We participate in God’s redemptive work as peacemakers, mediators, counselors.

God Creates. We participate in God’s creative work as artists, sculptors, actors, painters, musicians, poets, potters, weavers and seamstresses as well as interior designers, metalworkers, carpenters, builders, fashion designers, architects, novelists and urban planners.

God Provides. We participate in God’s work as provider through conserving, sustaining and replenishing. Public utility workers, career counselors, shipbuilders, farmers, firefighters, bus drivers, IT specialists, entrepreneurs, bankers, brokers, meteorologists, research technicians, civil servants, mechanics, engineers, building inspectors, machinists, statisticians, plumbers, welders, janitors all reflect this aspect of God’s labor.

God is Justice. We participate in God’s justice through roles such as judges, lawyers, paralegals, government regulators, city managers, policy researchers and advocates, law professors, diplomats, supervisors and administrators.

God is Compassion. Doctors, nurses, paramedics, psychologists, therapists, social workers, pharmacists, community workers, nonprofit directors, emergency medical technicians, counselors and welfare agents reflect this aspect of God’s labor.

God Reveals. Scientists, educators, journalists, scholars, and writers all participate in God’s revelatory work.

Human beings are made in the image of God, and God is a worker. Human labor has intrinsic value because in it we “image,” or reflect, our Creator. In all these various ways, God the Father continues his creative, sustaining and redeeming work through our human labor. It’s as if God is running a family business and there is a role in that business that only you can fulfill.

If we are to live all of life for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), then we need a God-centered view of work. It's not enough that we try to honor God in how we do our work, or that we try to be Christ-like to people at work, or that we support God's kingdom with the money we make from work. The glory of God must inform and transform our view of work itself.

Many see work simply as a means to an end. Work pays the mortgage or provides a retirement pension or a better life for the kids. We are using work. We're in it for what we get out of it. God may be honored in the results of our work, but he is not supreme in our view of work itself.

As Christians, we can be encouraged by knowing that our work in cultural transformation will one day be fulfilled. "If you're a city planner, there is a New Jerusalem," Keller says. "If you're a lawyer, there will be a time of perfect righteousness and justice." An artist will see perfect beauty. A physician will find perfect health. Because thorns and thistles come up, we need hope. Work is frustrating, and we don't always see the fruit we hope for.

Because of the fall, work is hard. Work involves sweat and toil, thorns and thistles. Or, if you prefer a more Silicon Valley analogy, work involves stress and overtime and belligerent bosses and mundane meetings. Not everything in the world of work is as it should be. Work has been cursed, but work is still good.

It's important that we see both the goodness of work in God's original creation and the struggle of work under the fall. If we only see the good, we'll be frustrated when things don't go as they should. If we only see the bad, we'll have a hard time doing our work to the glory of God. Work is not all good, and it's not all bad. It is part of God's good creation which has been tainted by the fall, and God is at work to redeem work.

Through us, God is after the renewal of creation. Grace doesn't just change our eternal destiny. It changes our whole worldview, our entire basis for living, the grid through which we see the world. Redemption affects every part of us. And through us, God's redemption is extended into the world around us.

So redemption in Christ must transform our view of work. Work is no longer a necessary evil. It is now a calling. Work has great spiritual significance because it is a chance for God to be glorified. Remember 1 Corinthians 10:31, "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." And in Colossians 3:17, "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father." When

you show up at your job, you're there for the glory of God. God wants to be honored in what you do and in how you do it.

You are a full-time Christian worker regardless of your title. Are you wondering how that works in the real world? I have these suggestions:

One, talk to God every day. If you aren't talking to God, don't be talking to others about him. You aren't doing anyone any favors. Our conversations about God need to come from our own living relationship with him. Dr. John Stott once observed that one of the major reasons people reject the Gospel is not because they perceive it to be false but because they perceive it to be trivial. Is it surprising that this drop in the perceived relevance of church teaching to daily life is paralleled by a drop in private prayer and daily Bible reading? I don't think so. Just as a small amount of yeast transforms flour into bread, in our small acts, God redeems and restores his creation.

Secondly, while we want to think of life as a peach – as holistic, rather than an orange where we segment life - don't expect life to be peachy. Following Jesus doesn't mean that life is easy. It's not. You might miss your quota. You might lose a client. You might get fired. You might have conflict with your boss or your co-workers. These things don't mean that Jesus doesn't love you or that God is punishing you. Rather, they are the inevitable result of living in a fallen world. Remember thorns and thistles. Work is affected by the fall. We want to see the wonderful, holy work of creation, and we want to be realistic about the fall. We live in the already-but not-yet reality that Jesus has come and will come again to fully usher in the kingdom of God.

Third, practice the Sabbath. Rest is a deeply spiritual thing. The world says work, work, work. God invites us to rest. We need to take time with God to replenish. If you want your car to run well, you get clean sparkplugs. We too need to clean our fuel, and we do that through resting in God.

Fourth, learn to pray the Lord's prayer. There's a reason Jesus taught his disciples to "pray in this way." Jesus knew we become what we pray. When our prayers focus on our needs

and our agendas and the ways we want God to bless us, we become self-centered, myopic people. To save us from this, Jesus gave us a pattern for prayer that keeps our eyes on the Father's name, the Father's kingdom, the Father's will. Using this pattern will help us remember that work, like all of life, is about God, not you. Try praying the Lord's prayer before work and after work and during work. We do this not in order to get God to do something for us, but to get ourselves into a God-centered rhythm of life.

See yourself as full-time Christian worker. Look for the white cars. May God be glorified in you.