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Sermon author: Dennis Mullen - Morrison Hill Christian Church P. O. Box 59 Kingston, TN 37763 USA 865.376.5205 dennis@morrisonhill.com
www.morrisonhill.com www.waitingforsunday.com

Finding God in Work – 9.6.9

Whatever happened to work?

When you were young, didn't you long to help Mom use the oven to bake something? Couldn't you just not wait till you were old enough to push the lawnmower around like Dad? And didn't they buy you an Easy Bake Oven, and a Fisher Price lawnmower and vacuum cleaner so you could pretend to work? Then, when you finally got old enough to do those things, you stopped wanting to.

Half of my childhood dreams had to do with working some idealized job. The first one I set my sites on? Pumping gas! It's a noble profession that doesn't even exist anymore! Then it was a policeman, a truck driver, a farmer, a veterinarian that I wanted to be. You probably had some of these same dreamy ideas about work. So what happened?

Well, partly, we grew up, and we saw things as they really are. We found out the truth of the Haitian proverb that if work was fun, the rich wouldn't have left it to the poor! And we discovered that the nature of most work is that you're serving someone else's interests and demands, not your own – that's why you get paid.

But there is something spiritual going on too, which is why I want to speak this Labor Day Sunday on Finding God in Work. Work is a gift from God and work is fallen. Both are true. God isn't as easy to find in work as he intended, but work still bears traces of his touch.

Some of our childhood fantasies about work would fit better in **Genesis 1-2** than in anything that comes after **Genesis 3**. In **Genesis 2:15**, the Bible says that **"The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."** This was satisfying and fulfilling work, I'm sure, because although there were things to do, there were no problems in doing them – no drought, no crop disease, no devouring pests, and Adam reported directly to God, not to some middle manager or to some relative of the boss who sat in an office and took Facebook quizzes all day.

And it isn't surprising that God made man a worker. We are fashioned in His image after all, and he spent the first six days working. And when **Genesis 2:2-3** tells about the day of rest, it actually emphasizes his work in triplicate: **By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.**

But in **Genesis 3**, Adam and Eve sinned and Eden fell to grief, and work became frustrating. God cursed the ground because of Adam, saying: **"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 and thistles for you, and 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 and to dust you will return"** (3:17b-19).

Now in our lives, work can still be very discouraging, but for different reasons of human making. Many jobs are frustrating because they are sliced into small pieces and your assignment and responsibility is so narrow that you don't feel any connection to what is being done.

Two quick stories to illustrate: The first is an old tale about two masons working on one of the great cathedrals of Europe. Both are mixing mortar to lay stone. Someone asks them: "What are you doing?" "I'm mixing mud". The second: "I'm building a cathedral".

The other story is one I heard someone tell about buying a hamburger. This guy placed his order, and since this was 20 years ago, the girl at the counter called it into a microphone for the workers in the back. The problem was that the customer could see very well that there wasn't anyone in the back, and he said so, to which the girl replied: "Well, I did MY job!"

She's especially dimwitted if she REALLY thinks that this is acceptable, but many jobs these days are just that cut off from the actual product. One summer I had a factory job making hoses, most of which went on GM engines or Whirlpool washing machines. As I learned to do that job, I imagined a dozen ways in which I might accidentally be damaging those hoses while shaping them, and I didn't want to do that, but how could I know? Did anyone inspect the hoses I made? I figured someone inspected a sample of my work before it was shipped, but if they did, I never knew it. I assumed that no news was good news, and I just did my job and didn't worry about the rest. That job was so small that it would have taken a great optimist to take the view of the mason who said "I'm building a cathedral". I was building GM cars at a very low level, though, so if you had a GM car built around 1985 that blew a bunch of hoses, you know who to blame! (The people working next to me made casket gaskets, and I'm sure that no one has yet complained about THEIR work!)

Whenever I think about work, I like to turn to **Proverbs** and **Ecclesiastes** because both books are so very realistic about the good and bad of work. Now the way you understand **Proverbs** is different from other parts of Scripture. **Proverbs** describes how things usually work and how we're supposed to approach life, without making guarantees. Now if Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth," that's a promise. But when it says in **Proverbs** that "**All hard work brings a profit**"(14:23a), it isn't contradicting God's Word if I point out that it was hard to find the profit in it that time when I worked hard to replace my brakes, and then forgot to pump them up and ran into the back of my friend's truck, which cost me some body work! And when **Proverbs** says that "**mere talk leads only to poverty**"(14:23b), it isn't anti-Bible to remember that some people make money with mere talk, such as telemarketers, politicians, actors (and preachers). I'm joking a bit, but I think you get that **Proverbs** lays out some wise ways to live, and they're wise even if they don't always pay off (or seem to).

So here are some things that Proverbs says about work:

12:11 - He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment. We could update that to say that he who gets a job at Papa John's or who at least mows the grass will have spending money but he who sits around playing Final Fantasy lacks judgment, not to mention the use of his cell phone.

12:14 - From the fruit of his lips a man is filled with good things as surely as the work of his hands rewards him. Here's one that actually has something good to say about how we talk to others, what we say, and it takes for granted the way that work the work you do with your hands has a reward built in, whether it's washing dishes, mopping the floor, scooping the kitty litter or getting some laundry done.

If you've had much experience having people work for you, this one hits home: **18:9 - One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys.** My first real job was at a small grocery store, only six aisles, with the owner working at the meat counter (one time without a shirt

on!) If I had hated the owner, I could have broken into the store at night and smashed all the eggs on the floor. Or to be a little more subtle, I could have done a lousy job at my work for a couple of months, wasting time, offending customers, carelessly damaging product. Very few people would break in and smash eggs. But a lot of us could carelessly become slack in our work. We should remember that the effect is similar.

I'm glad I didn't have to work at that factory making hoses for more than a summer. Not because the work was dull, but because there was peer pressure there to work slowly and to waste time between tasks. People who had been there awhile figured that if they made too much product, they'd get laid off for awhile, and perhaps they were right. But it's damaging to your soul to work a job where you have to suspend your sense of right and wrong eight hours a day in order to serve some other purpose.

Then there is this proverb that may not be a promise, but it's a good challenge: **22:29 - Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men.** We all know skilled people who actually lost their work altogether when the company shut down, but still this proverb reminds us of the value of being very good at what we do. Lester Rice, who attended MHCC in the 70s and 80s, ran a body shop near Midtown which he called "just an old country place" but he was so good that his work was on one-of-a-kind cars from the 30s and restored hot rods from the 50s. Walking through his shop was like going to a museum, and his clients included folks like Senator Howard Baker.

Of course you could say that it IS a promise, in a sense. The Brother Lawrence I talked about last week found that he could do all of his work as an offering of love for the King of Kings, so he wasn't working for ordinary people either. That's what **Colossians 3:23-24** tells us too: **²³Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, ²⁴since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.**

When you get to **Ecclesiastes**, the nature of the book is that King Solomon (the author) has spent some time trying out different ways to live, to see what makes a person happy. He tries pleasure, he tries learning, and he tries work – especially working on great projects. And he finds out that every one of these lifestyles has something pleasurable about it, but in the end all of them are meaningless. None of them are worth living for. Only God is worth living for, which is a lesson we should find out sooner rather than later, and we should apply it to work.

Here are some of the things Solomon discovered about work: From **2:17-25 - ¹⁷ So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ¹⁸ I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless.**

Now here's an example of where you can end up if you make work your idol. You start thinking about your legacy, and you become so possessive over your work that you fear the day when you quit it and leave it behind to others who may be so thick-headed that they manage to completely undo it in six months. If you're lucky, that's when they'll bring you back in as a consultant! But Solomon figured out that you had to let go of those worries and look for your rewards more simply: **²⁴ A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?** Solomon found a simple truth that the best and surest reward for work is simply to enjoy it while you do it to the extent that you can (and this is partly a choice), and then to step back at the end of the day and survey what you've accomplished, what you've done well, how

you have been of service to someone...and then leave it there. Pick it up again tomorrow when it's time to work again. If you say that you can't do that, Solomon already said that you can't – not without God. "This too...is from the hand of God" so pray to him for the gift of being able to eat and drink and find satisfaction in your work.

Solomon goes on to talk about why people work, and he finds some problems there: From **4:4 - And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.** Our economy actually depends on a certain amount of envy and greed fueling competitive consumption, so it's good to hear Solomon's warning here of how meaningless that is. During that job at the grocery store, I was carrying out someone's groceries (another extinct job) when a little boy asked me, "Why do you work here?" His Mom laughed and said, "The only reason anyone works is to make money". That's true, but it isn't the whole truth. We work because we are made in God's image, and God works. When work allows us to be a little creative and see the result of our labor and get to know people while we work, it isn't hard to motivate most of us to do it, even if it's hard work. When work isolates us and has no visible connection to anything meaningful and demands that we not think but merely follow rules, then the only reward left is the pay, and even a fairly high wage has a hard time compensating us.

I ran across a fascinating fact about Henry Ford this week, from a 1948 biography.* When Ford set up his first assembly line in 1913, many of his workers simply walked off the job. These were guys that were used to hard work, but there was something revolting, something sub-human, they thought, about men doing such small and repetitive work. In fact, in the earliest days of the assembly line, if Ford wanted to retain 100 workers, do you know how many they had to hire? **963!** Almost 90% of people initially hired wouldn't work like that. So Ford doubled wages and began to retain workers, and over time, we have come to accept assembly-line type work as the normal state of things. Over the years, factories have improved in this country. They're cleaner, safer, and the workers often have a bigger role in the product than in Henry Ford's day. These are some of the gains earned by organized labor, which we're reminded of on Labor Day. All of which illustrates the fact that, though money sends us to work, money isn't the only important factor in a job, and it's usually a soul-killing job where the ONLY reward is money.

Besides, money goes only so far. From **5:10-12 - ¹⁰ Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless. ¹¹ As goods increase, so do those who consume them.** (You get rich, suddenly you've got a posse, a collection of ne'er-do-well nephews and drunken uncles who suddenly remember how much you owe them for your success!) **And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them? ¹² The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.**

Solomon would make a good career counselor for high school students, even if he might come off a little too depressing. "Work can be good", he would tell them, "but don't make it your God". The money you earn comes in handy, but don't live for money, or you'll never be satisfied. The fact is, some of the sweetest labor is that which you can drop at the end of the day and not worry too much about it, because it's someone else's money at stake."

To wrap up, listen to **Ephesians 4:28 - He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.** This verse gives me two things: A little career advice and another reason to work.

The career advice, that I hope you'll consider without taking it as a command from the Bible is to learn to do something useful with your own hands. Is it random that he says specifically to work with your own hands, not just to work? Is it random that he tells the Corinthians that he

works hard with his own hands (1 Corinthians 4:12)? No, it's not random. A thief steals with his hands, which is why in some cultures they cut off the hands of thieves, but Paul says to redeem your hands by doing something useful with them.

But maybe there's even more to it than that. Someone recently commented [on my blog](#), saying: *"I have come to a firm belief in the last few years that working with your hands...is an exercise in understanding God. God is a maker and creator and I think we have that inner spark or drive because we are an image of Him. Maybe we should have another "fair" for people from church to show what they make; it could inspire others."* I agree. I don't mean to glorify physical labor and ignore how hard it can be, but to make something yourself or to fix something yourself gets close to the way God made Adam, when he stooped down and scooped up some clay and breathed life into it; or the way Jesus healed people, laying his carpenter's hands on them and blessing them.

As far as career advice goes, I'll add this: Many of the things you can learn to do with your own hands cannot be done over a wire from India or the Philippines. "You can't hammer a nail over the Internet", as one economist puts it.** Now even skilled labor changes and sometimes becomes obsolete, but maybe it's time to find fresh wisdom in an ancient proverb like **Proverbs 12:24 - Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in slave labor.**

Then, another reason to work. That mother, who told her son that people work only for money – she probably meant money to pay bills and buy for yourself. That's a given, but Paul doesn't mention it here. He says that the former thief should work **that he may have something to share with those in need**. Since work is God's gift to us, it follows that we should use it to bless others. When I think of the few things I know how to do well, it's embarrassing to think of how few of them are of use to others outside the context of the church. My neighbor can tell me how to replace a starter or bleed my brake lines, or he can fix a lawnmower for someone who can't afford it, and he stays very busy even in retirement being useful to others as an act of worship. Me? It's not often that someone says: "Can you write a sermon for me? Can you teach me the finer points of using Google? Would you read this book for me, or help me learn to flip channels as skillfully as you do?" With some exceptions, most of the really useful things we can do for others are things we can do with our own hands.

When all is said and done, here's the heart of the matter: Finding God in work is a step of faith, like Brother Lawrence (from last week) took when he practiced God's presence. God is already with you as you work, so find him there. Practice his presence, do your work well, and do it with integrity, and serve God as you serve others.

Prayer
Invitation

*From Keith Sward's 1948 book *The Legend of Henry Ford*, cited by Matthew Crawford in [Shop Class as Soulcraft](#).
**Also from *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, a quote from Alan Blinder.