

Practically Spiritual Work

Good morning, and if you have your Bibles this morning let's begin by turning to 2 Thess 3.

This morning we're going to be looking at the role that work plays into our quest towards being practically spiritual. We've looked so far at our words, the tongue and its effect on our lives and its revealing nature of the contents of one's heart. We've looked at practical ways to live out Biblical roles of husbands and wives, along with how to love our spouses better, as laid out in scripture. Included in that second sermon by Walt was more broad application in all human relationships, how to love, to seek to honor your spouse your friends your neighbors in a selfless way. Our community group talked last week about that challenge, because it's phrased that way in Romans: Outdo each other in showing honor. What a beautiful challenge that is. With Allen teaching on parenting the last two weeks, I was convicted and motivated to be a more consistent, intentional father to my children, with the absolute ultimate goal to see them come to a place of trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation. I'm going to try not to tear up here. As the guys said throughout this series, we're seeking to teach on things that all of us deal with and experience, and to apply Biblical truths to help us navigate those things in a very practical way. The question I want us to ask and explore this morning is "how do we bring Biblical Spirituality into our work?"

Something I've noticed throughout this series is how each sermon has been about imitating God in some way. Have you noticed that? Love your wife as Christ loves the church. Headship in marriage is compared to the roles inside of God's triune nature. God the Father is the head of Jesus, not as a superior, but as an equal with a different role to play. We are to parent with both discipline and grace, just as our heavenly Father parents us. He disciplines the son that he loves, he craves relationship with us as his children. His words have integrity, He says nothing that he doesn't mean. He, Jesus, was filled with both Grace and Truth, as we are to be. A large component in the way we experience life in a more spiritual way, the way we bring glory to our God the Father, creator of all the universe? We learn His ways, we acknowledge their innate rightness and goodness, and by the grace of God and the power of His spirit we seek to imitate him. One important way that we imitate God and bring glory to Him is by being a good and diligent worker.

But why do we work, anyway? I remember applying for my first official job at McDonald's back when I was 16, and the interviewer asked me, "so Jeff, why do you want to work here?" I remember pausing and thinking uhhhhh that's a really good question. I don't want to work here, but my dad seemed to think it was important and even necessary for me to work here. I thought the whole arrangement where he gave me money to buy things was working out fine thank you very much and working would only cut into my dreams of becoming a professional basketball player. (See, that's what happened). I am fortunate that somewhere along the way I was corrected and I learned that although I had a rather deeply rooted propensity for laziness, it is sinful and contrary to the Word of God to indulge in laziness. God commands us to work.

At the end of Second Thessalonians, in chapter 3:6-10 it says:

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

The church in Thessalonica had some believers who felt that work was beneath them and so they spent their days in idleness. The apostle Paul condemns this kind of laziness and encourages them to not be a burden to others. Those who were able to work, but chose not to, were to be shunned and not given any food to eat. This may seem harsh, but in Proverbs 16:26 it says "A worker's appetite work for him; his mouth urges him on." If you can't reason with a person to join in the labor, let his hunger motivate him to work.

I. The Danger of Laziness

So that's the first aspect of work I wanted to discuss. No matter what you work at, do it. Do not be lazy; fight the temptation to fall back into that rut of the sluggard. The proverbs have a lot to say about the slothful, the sluggard, and I wish I couldn't relate at all to what they say, but that's just not the case. What about you? Let's take a look:

In chapter 6 the sluggard will only work with a chief, an officer, a ruler cracking the whip on them, but if there is none, they sleep! "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber and want like an armed man."

10:26 "Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him." He can't be trusted by his employer, he has to be watched, babysat!

13:4 "The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied."

15:19 "The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway."

21:25 "The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor."

I love this one: 22:13 “The sluggard says “There is a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!” He’s making any and every excuse to stay in and sleep instead of going out and doing his work! Unreal!

Are any of you tempted, like I am, to picture “the sluggard” as one person with all these extreme attributes and behaviors? Like this big greasy guy who sits around and his wife or mother vacuums up the crumbs around him, as he just gives into any craving and temptation he wants? It feels kind of good knowing there’s people out there like that. It puffs us up right? I’m definitely tempted to do that when I read the Proverbs. And guess what? That is SO wrong. Yes, there are extreme cases like this out there, for sure. But are these not sinful tendencies in each of us? Stop reading the Bible to have proof about how horrible your co-workers, your spouse, your neighbors, your siblings are! You’re lazy too! And so am I! May we be convicted, not condemned by God’s word, and may we heed the warnings prescribed in the Proverbs, specifically about being lazy.

The year in which we live, 2017, it is very easy, even tempting at times to be lazy. Our culture celebrates easy living. The Youtuber making millions by goofing off with his friends, tv shows like The Office making comedic hijinks off of avoiding doing work. We have credit cards, we have family that would ultimately support us if we ever lost our jobs for being lazy. And if our family can’t support us, there’s always the government, who in my opinion makes it too tempting at times to receive help. I’ve honestly worked with several guys who were laid off seasonally from positions, and were incentivized to stay home collecting a bigger check than they would if they were back at work. Most of us probably have multiple safety nets, waiting to catch us if we slip, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing, but it can rob us of motivation to work hard no matter what.

Sum up laziness point: the danger of laziness is that it feels good in the moment but brings bad things in the end. We procrastinate doing that thing we don’t want to do, and it feels good, until the bill comes in for our procrastination. Poverty comes upon us. We are looked at as unreliable and untrustworthy by people around us. We crave things but don’t work to satisfy our needs so we live life wishing for more but not working for more. And our lives begin to crumble from neglect:

*I passed by the field of a sluggard,
by the vineyard of a man lacking sense,
³¹ and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns;
the ground was covered with nettles,
and its stone wall was broken down.
³² Then I saw and considered it;
I looked and received instruction.
³³ A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,
³⁴ and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
and want like an armed man. Prov. 24:30-34*

God designed it such that life takes maintenance. If we don’t take care of our health, relationships, homes, spiritual health, etc, these things will become overgrown and broken down like the field of the sluggard. Laziness is hazardous to our health!

II. All honorable work is spiritual work

Paul commands the Thessalonians in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to avoid those who don't work (vs. 1). Twice he holds up his own work ethic as something for them to imitate (vv. 7 & 9). Gospel work is furthered by plain old hard work. Ministry isn't just about full time ministers - we all have a ministry - it's called doing the work God has given us to do.

As followers of Jesus Christ, have you ever thought about joining the mission field full time? This indeed is a high calling, and we love sending people overseas, like the Smallcomb family, to help spread the good news of Jesus Christ. And we need more, Amen? But we couldn't all go, right? I mean technically we could, but who would support us? Without generous, faithful givers working 9-5's like all of you, we would arrive overseas, and soon be out of money and therefore food. Soon, we're either trying to come back home with our tails between our legs, or we're begging on the streets of Beijing, while preaching the Gospel? That's....weird. What would that say about our witness? "Man, they didn't think that plan through did they? I've been in circles, mostly at Bible College, that lifted the role of missionary very high. It's not that they SAID that the only way to truly honor Christ is to join the mission field, but man was there pressure. I wish my professors, my RA, the dean whenever they had the chance would say "You don't need to join the mission field to glorify Christ! You can glorify him in your boring, 9-5 job just as well! You can glorify him changing diapers, doing endless laundry, you can glorify Him by being generous with your money and proclaiming His sovereign will!"

But even outside of the question of full time ministry, I fall prey to temptation to think my work doesn't make a difference or isn't significant. Recently, about six months ago, Derrick and Lindsey Wagoner came over to our house for dinner, and he and I were outside grilling, like men do. We were talking about our work days, mine, as a wind turbine technician is a lot of times very physically draining, and I remember being worn out from the day, and boring even myself with the details of it: I climbed a tower, ran a palm sander, filled, sanded again, and painted. Three coats. Yawn. And his day, as a Radiologist was also draining, but different. He told me that he sat down with a young patient in whom they discovered cancer, and it was Derrick's job to 1) break the news to him/her, and 2) recommend treatment going forward. I imagine you'd see the despair in the patient's face: "Cancer? How can that be? How long do I have before I die?" The pain of delivering that blow would be lessened, I would think, by Derrick looking them in the eye and saying "You have time, there are options, let's talk about them." Being able to bring hope, to bring people back from the misery, with kindness and love in not just your voice, but your heart! Man, that's got to be a maze ing. I remember standing there, jealous, of my brother in that moment. It poured out, and I said "man, it has to be so awesome to do work that really matters." Derrick was quick in his response: "Hey man, all work matters." I knew that. But I needed the reminder. Maybe you need that reminder today. YOUR work matters. Whatever you are working at is making a difference in sustaining the balance of our world, and it matters.

But we can't all be radiologists! We can't all be nurses, or astronauts, missionaries, pastors. The human race, just like the earth itself, is so incredibly diverse! Thank the Lord above you and I have different strengths. Praise him that he has created people more intelligent than you and I. Another Proverb that stuck out to me: 25:2-It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out.

I think this verse is true in several ways, but have you ever considered how God, when he created the Earth, concealed so. Many. Things? Some things in creation are obvious. But what about things like iron ore, electricity, fire? God placed those things in our lives, but we had to work for them right? It took creativity, experiments, etc. Who was the first person to think, "hey, let's dig up these hard shiny chunks in the ground, melt them together, because my neighbor just discovered fire, and we can shape these chunks into whatever we want! Shovels, weapons, plows, so many things! Some people have creativity and ingenuity built into their nature, like our God, the creator of all that has ever been made. Or music? For those of you gifted in the area of music, what a gift from our God! But what in the world IS music? It's so other-worldly to me. Everything that has ever been made can be tracked back to raw materials placed on Earth by our creator. It pleases Him to see us discover the things he has concealed, to be productive with our time, to cultivate the earth, giving employment opportunities to others through that cultivation.

Can I do a quick straw poll here? How many people love their job, 100% of the time? When that alarm clock goes off in the early morning you jump out of bed, thrilled to start another exciting day of fulfilling, unbelievable, life-changing work? Well God bless you.

I recently read a book entitled "When Breath Becomes Air," written by Paul Kalanithi which is a memoir written by a young neurosurgeon who performs brain surgeries, mostly removing brain tumors from patients with cancer. These are obviously very uncommon procedures which are performed by only the world's most skilled surgeons. Well, the author performs them regularly, and after doing so for years, when he has almost completed his residency, he is diagnosed with cancer himself. And it's bad. The cancer has spread far and wide inside of his body, and he's told that even if they can successfully remove all of the cancer, which is unlikely, it is very likely to return and the best case scenario is that he will live only a few short years on this side of eternity. So he gets the surgery, they do remove it all, and cautiously he and his wife hope that the cancer won't be back. Around the time of the surgery, he obviously takes time away from practicing medicine, because the rigors of a surgical residency and the toll it takes on the human body, he just didn't have the strength for it. But soon after the surgery is complete, even though no one expected him to, he started to do exercises to build his muscle and endurance back up, so that he could return to the operating room, and make a difference in as many lives as possible before the cancer with little doubt returns. He was driven, feeling such a desire to return to his work. He HAD to get back in that room, bone saw in hand! As I listened to his account I paused and said "EESH. I cannot relate there." I would not be laying in that hospital bed post-op and whisper to Rachel, as she leans closer: "....Babe. I gotta get back up those towers. No matter what it takes." Do you know what I mean? Is anyone else there with me? I mean I don't mind my job, but I don't pop out of bed saying "Look out world, here I come! Never again will you be the same!" That would be nice, right? I think we all seek to do meaningful, work that lasts and that matters. And I'm up here to tell you that unless you're occupying yourself with illegal or immoral work, you're

doing work that matters. Work is not an evil thing, it is not a curse. It pre-dates the fall of man into temptation and sin. The Bible says in its first chapter that God created man in his own image, and he tasked man with dominion over the animals, and tending to the earth, to work it. In His own image he created man, meaning like God, more like him than anything else He created, and one who represents God on the earth. So like God, we were created with a desire to be productive, to be creative, to excel at things, to make a difference. But, as a result of the fall, we are cursed in that work will be difficult. God cursed the ground because of our sin, and therefore work will always be to some extent a struggle.

III. Practical qualities of a good worker

Right now I want to transition to some practical steps, some qualities to strive after to be good workers.

- a. **Reliable**-The first quality employers look for. Sorry, not just employers, people looking for a friend, a significant other, a good parent. Are you reliable? Can people count on you? One of the first questions any interviewer for any job is going to ask you is “do you have a reliable means of transportation?” Are you going to be able to show up? Are you going to follow through on what you said you would do?
- b. **Self-starter** (not needing someone to hover over them) It’s a waste of money to pay someone to watch another person to make sure they’re doing what they’re supposed to be doing!
- c. **Doesn’t waste time**-Idleness is abhorred throughout scripture. It has been said that idle hands are the devil’s playground. Idleness leads to all sorts of trouble, so avoid it, stay busy! In my experience, and I’ve worked several blue collar jobs over the years, the perfect conditions for drama, fighting, power struggles, gossip, you name it, is idleness. If people are either avoiding doing their work, or just don’t have enough to do, that’s the time to start trouble.
- d. **Honest**-This one is kind of obvious, but there is one Proverb that is repeated a couple times: The Lord detests dishonest scales, but accurate weights find favor with Him. This refers to when merchants used to scam people by making them overpay for goods paid for by weight. Probably not applicable....unless you work for Wegmans. But think of it this way. When you collect that paycheck every week, have you claimed hours where you truly weren’t productive? Are you giving to your employer or your customers the consideration you would want yourself if you were in their shoes?
- e. And finally, **making the most of the opportunities God has given us**. By proving to be diligent with small things, larger tasks, responsibility, opportunities will be presented.

For the Christian, there is more to these requirements to be a good worker. As believers, we know that each person we work with or near, has an eternal soul. Witnessing to these people looks different than the evangelism one does on the street corner, proclaiming that the end is near and we should repent! It's a longer-minded game with our co-workers. And a more zoomed in view into our lives for them. Jesus tells us, has his disciples, that our light should shine before men, that there should be a difference in us. There should be a difference in our work ethic, our integrity, even our care for others. And because it's zoomed in, and you and I are not perfect, there needs to be repentance and apologies when we mess up, or take responsibility when something is our fault. Talk about standing out! You don't have to stand on your office chair and proclaim the gospel for all to hear, there will be more caught than taught, as Allen said last week about parenting. They'll be watching and learning what we truly believe by our actions, and when they have a personal crisis in their life, or questions about the afterlife, etc. they will think of you and come to you with their questions, hopefully. And hopefully you're ready to share the hope of Jesus Christ with them.

When I was studying for this, one Proverb I came across really struck me, and it reminded me of God's sovereignty, His power to control the circumstances of this world. It's Proverbs 14:3- "Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him." The link between the poor man and the Father, his maker is interesting because it's easy to look down on people in poverty, right? Haven't they read the Proverbs? The path to wealth is simple, just do the right thing, make good decisions! Yes, sometimes people are in poverty due to their own poor decisions, but it's possible they were set up for poverty before they were even born. And how can we blame that person, or look down on them? Maybe you've been successful in your employment: consider, have you had a streak of good health? Have you had connections that got you that interview that you probably wouldn't have on your own? Were your parents loving enough to kick your butt out that door to drive you to drop off that application at that fast food joint? (See what I did there?) There are literally countless decisions and influences on our lives that affect us without us having any control or say. God uses circumstances outside of humans' control to direct, influence, dare I say control things in our lives. This includes our place of employment.

God doesn't compare us to the next person who may have had very different opportunities than we had. He simply calls us to be faithful with what He has given us.

Conclusion

I want to begin to bring this to a close, but first I want to acknowledge that some of you may hate your jobs some days. You don't have to raise your hands. I really do understand that. Maybe you're a stay-at-home parent, going crazy because your infant or toddler is all consuming and most of your communication is "no don't touch that!" I'm very close to this situation... Perhaps you're at home with a snarky teenager who when you try to get them to open up and talk to you they say "I'm fine! Leave me alone!" I am not looking forward to those days.... Maybe you've been at the same job for years and years, and it's no longer a challenge but it's too late to change career paths and you're just waiting for retirement so you can put your feet up. Or perhaps you just simply tolerate your work, live for that paycheck, and just get through your shift, looking for fulfillment and

satisfaction anywhere else. It can feel hopeless right? One thing I want to communicate this morning is that because your work matters, and because a huge percentage of your time is spent there, there needs to be more to it than just enduring. At the same time, as I've said, work can be discouraging at times. It can feel like "what am I doing? What have I done up to this point? Where am I going with this?" These are good questions to ask. In the Word of God there's a Psalm attributed to Moses, it is unique in that, and it was likely passed down through generations, recited regularly by the Jewish people. It's Psalm 90, and you probably know it from where he says

"The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away."

So you're toiling at your job, your occupation, and it can seem hopeless, directionless at times. Who better understands this than Moses, who is told to wander for 40 years with his people until they reach the land that was promised to them? Literally and intentionally wandering, knowing they won't find their destination. Even worse for Moses, because he's told he never will reach it himself. He has seen his days drag on, yet the years fall away like a sigh. Because of the wrath of God poured out on their disobedience, their mission of sorts has been cursed, much like the ground was cursed in the book of Genesis. But Moses, the servant of God, doesn't lose hope: he continues:

"So teach us to number our days that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!"

May the Lord teach you and I to truly number our days, to make the most of each one, and may He truly establish the work of our hands. Let's pray.