

## Learning to Enjoy God's First Blessing Genesis 2:8-15

Have you ever wondered what heaven would be like? For me, it would be a place where I could eat anything I wanted and never gain weight, and could regularly play golf with friends on an immaculate course and always shoot par or better.

All of us have our idea of a heavenly existence. In the following old tombstone epitaph, we get another person's perspective on heavenly life. Listen to this:

*Here lies an old woman who always was tired,  
She lived in a house where help was not hired.  
Her last words on earth were, "Dear Friends, I am goin',  
Where cookin' ain't done, nor sweepin' nor sewin'  
But everything there is exact to my wishes,  
Since nobody eats, there's no washin' of dishes.  
I'll be where loud anthems will always be ringing,  
But having no voice I'll not have to be singing.  
So don't mourn for me friends, don't mourn for me never,  
Cause I'm going to heaven to do nothin' forever."*

"Going to heaven to do nothing forever," for me, that doesn't define heaven, that's a definition for the word "boring." I don't think I'd enjoy being in a place where I did nothing forever."

Obviously, the lady who penned these words looked forward to finding relief from the burdens of everyday work: and at one time or another, we all know what she feels like. At one time or another, we all would like a break from work.

Tomorrow is Labor Day, a day when we get a break from work as we stop to reflect on those in our society who bless us with their work.

Interestingly, one of the first subjects discussed in the Bible is work. In the creation story, found Genesis 1, we hear about God working for six days to create the world and then resting on the seventh.

As we move into the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Genesis we learn about the work God gave to humankind. Listen to today's text as we hear God assigning work to Adam and Eve. Our text is found in Genesis 2:8-15.

*<sup>8</sup> Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. <sup>9</sup> The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

*<sup>10</sup> A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. <sup>11</sup> The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. <sup>12</sup> (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) <sup>13</sup> The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. <sup>14</sup> The name of the third*

*river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.*

*15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*

Did you hear the last verse? The very first thing God does after creating humankind is to give them a job. He introduces Adam to work, telling him to take care of the garden he has just planted. Yes, work was one of God's first blessings bestowed upon humankind.

Now if you are seated here today, bone-weary and tired from a week of hard work, you may find it strange that I would call work God's first blessing.

In fact, some may be quick to point out that work came as a result of sin. Pointing to Genesis 3:17-19, we are reminded that hard labor was part of God's punishment for Adam and Eve's sin. Listen to these words:

*17 To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,'*

*"Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. 18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. 19 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."*

Yes, phrases like "painful toil," and "the sweat of your brow," are not phrases one immediately associates with blessings. These words sound more like being cursed.

I think it's important to remember that there is a difference between the work God assigned in Genesis 2 and the work he assigned in Genesis 3. The work in Genesis 2 is work before sin came into the world. The work described in Genesis 3 is work that has been turned into arduous labor by the unleashing of sin into the world.

You see, that's the way with sin. Sin takes what is good and turns it into some evil. God blesses us with medication but when medication is misused it becomes a curse. God has blessed us with food and drink but when we overeat or overdrink those blessings hurt us. God blesses us with sexual intimacy but when it's abused by sin it becomes something ugly and hurtful. And the same is true with work. Work in itself is God's blessing, but because of sin, God's blessing of work turns into the curse of toil.

Let me give you an example. I love my work as a pastor, and because I am surrounded by a supportive, effective staff, on most days I feel blessed to go to work. But, in the past, there have been those times when I have worked with staff members who have made my work situation a living hell. In those situations, work did not feel like a reward but a curse.

You see, it wasn't the work that made me feel cursed. The work was the same in both situations. It was the sinful conditions that surrounded my work, conditions that lessened God's blessing.

That's what we find happening here in the Genesis account. In Genesis 2, God blesses Adam and Eve by giving them a job, by asking them to tend the Garden of Eden. But when they disobeyed God and brought sin into the world,

the conditions of their work change. No longer were they tending a verdant garden. Instead, they were tending one with thorns and thistles, no longer was that garden productive, but because of sin, they had to work unproductive land that showed little for their effort.

No, work in itself, is not a curse; it's God's blessing, and if it doesn't bless you, you can usually trace its toilsomeness back to the effect of sin.

In a moment, I'm going to talk about the blessing of work, but before I do, let me remind you that my words are not only being addressed to those of you who work paying jobs. Work is something that blesses all those engaged in meaningful labor, whether salaried or volunteer. It blesses children and students, as well as their parents. Work even blesses those who are officially retired. In fact, I find that the most content, fulfilled, retired folks are those who continue to engage in some kind of meaningful, volunteer work.

So how does work bless us? First, I think work blesses us by giving us a sense of fulfillment and significance. Many of us find our value in work and I think, to some extent, that's what God intended.

Every now and then, when I'm dealing with a family who has lost a loved one, someone will console me by saying, "I'm sorry you're having to deal with all of this. I know it must be very hard work."

In one way they are right. Caring for people who are facing the most difficult days of their lives takes a lot of emotional and physical energy as well as a lot of time. But you know what? Caring for hurting people gives me a sense of fulfillment, a sense of significance. When I can bring comfort to a

mourning spouse or deliver a funeral eulogy that helps an entire congregation cope with the loss of someone they love, that work gives me a sense of fulfillment. It helps me know that I've done something important, something that has made a difference in someone's life.

Perhaps that's how we should all view our work. Work will make us feel significant if we realize our labor makes a difference – a difference in someone's life, a difference in our world. Yes, work blesses us because it gives us a sense of fulfillment, a sense of significance.

But secondly, work blesses us when it gives us a sense of productivity. Few things make us feel better than the process of producing something good.

Children learn this early on. How often have you had a child run up to you and say, "Look what I made, mommy?" When children stop and look at what they've made with their hands, they don't stop and think about burdensome nature of the work that created it. They are excited for the freedom and opportunity to produce something good.

When we feel like we are being productive, it always gives us a sense of blessing.

One of the most blessed feelings I regularly experience is what I call "the street view." Let me explain. I enjoy working in my yard and sometimes will spend days in back-breaking, exhaustive yard work, cutting grass, trimming natural areas, pulling weeds, and planting flowers. While I'm in the middle of the job, I don't always feel so blessed; but once my work is finished and my tools are put away, I'll walk out to the street and take "the street view." I walk

out to the street and look back on my finished yard, and when I see the beauty of what I have created with my own hands, it makes me feel good. In fact, it makes me understand what God must have felt like at the end of each day of creation, when he would stand back and take the street view of what he created and say, "It is good. It is very good." Yes, from that street view I feel blessed by my work. I feel blessed because I've been able to be productive.

But last of all, I believe work is a blessing because work gives us a chance to exercise our God-given gifts. You see, I believe God gives each of us spiritual gifts which allow us to accomplish some kind of holy work. To some of us he gives the gift of public speaking, to others, the gift of making music, to others, the gift of organization, to some he gives the gift of caring for children, to others, the gift of teaching or the gift of encouraging. Yes, God gives each of us these gifts so the work of his kingdom will be done. But, at the same time, I believe God gives us these gifts so we can find the blessing of using them.

Every other week, I sit down at my computer knowing I must write a newsletter article. At first, the task feels like labor. Here I go again, having to come up with a subject and then putting that subject into words in a way that is interesting and effective. Yes, at first it feels like labor, but as I get into it, I soon feel what I call the "holy rush." It's that special feeling that comes when you realize God is using you to do something special.

That "holy rush" is waiting for all of us who will exercise our God-given gifts. God blesses us when we do what he has created us to do. God blesses us when we can see how we fit into his holy plan.

Yes, work is a blessing from God, a blessing because it allows us to feel a sense of significance, a blessing because it allows us to sense the joy of productivity, and a blessing because it allows us to understand how we fit into the Kingdom of God; but let me add a word of warning.

Work can quickly change from a blessing to a curse if we do not heed God's commandment to rest. When the Hebrews told the creation story, they didn't stop with telling about God's work. They ended the story telling about God's day of rest. And like God, our work will only be a blessing to us if we take seriously our need to rest.

In closing let me offer this Irish Blessing,

*May your work be that which warms your heart, heals your hurts, and gives your life true value.*

*And when all your work is over, and your day of rest has dawned, may your thoughts be not of burdens lifted, but of the tasks well done.*