Transforming Our Work Perspective – Part 1

Reflecting God in Our Work

John 5:17

People have a lot of different attitudes about work *(from coolfunnyquotes.com)*

- When you wake up at 6 in the morning, you close your eyes for 5 minutes and suddenly it's 6:45. But when you're at work and it's 2:30, you close your eyes for 5 minutes and suddenly it's 2:31.
- If you think your boss is stupid, remember: you wouldn't have a job if they were any smarter.
- You know that moment when you get up in the morning, you're full of energy and you can't wait to get to work? Me neither!
- Got to work this morning and my boss told me *'have a good day'*; so I went home and had a great day!
- I once had a job in an orange juice factory, but I got canned because I couldn't concentrate.

Lord willing, we are going to take the next few weeks to look at this area of work from God's perspective. My goal is nothing less than the transformation of how we view work as Christians. Now when I say “work”, I am not just talking about paid jobs. Work refers to any effort that we put out to accomplish a goal. But it does NOT include play, rest, hobbies and leisure. *(Repeat)*

- Chores around the house? ... they are all work
- If you are in school? ... paying attention, reading, and doing your homework ... those are all work
- If you are retired or on disability ... the extra effort that it takes you to do simple things like putting on your clothes, making your meals, getting from one place to another, personal grooming and other necessary efforts to keep going ... they are all work.
- All that we do to serve Jesus ... is work – from teaching a Sunday school class to taking our turn in nursery. So whether we are helping others do something, cleaning the church, helping out in ministries or going out of your way to befriend new people ... we are doing work.
- Raising kids, working out the budget, paying the bills, straightening up the house, mowing the grass, that’s all work.
- And of course, what we do at our paid jobs is work, whether that is full-time or part-time.

We will spend more time working then we will do anything else in life, including sleep, because work is all the effort we put forth to provide for our life, serve the Lord, help others and care for our family. Work is one of the most important areas for us to understand Biblically. Jesus wants our faith to transform our perspective of work. Yet so often, our attitude about work comes from our culture, our old nature, or the lies of the devil rather than from the Word and plan of God.
PROPOSITION: All work has value because when we work we reflect and imitate Almighty God.

I. Some common views of work

A. Utilitarian/ necessary evil that came in with sin
I learned many good lessons about work from God through my upbringing, my many jobs High School thru Seminary and from the Bible – but my overall picture of work was still very utilitarian. One worked during the week so you could be free for the weekends. Vacations, holidays and weekends were where real living happened. In fact, I use to tell people that my goal was “a 52-week paid vacation” – every year. I saw retirement as the time to just play and do what you wanted. Although I saw many beneficial aspects to parts of work, my overarching picture of work was that work is a “necessary evil”. The primary reason I worked was to provide the funds to live life, take care of my family, help others and join God in His work. What is interesting, as I look back, is how much this overall perspective of work clashed with the individual insights God was teaching me about work.

B. Self-actualizing/identity
It is also common in America for people to see their identity in their work or their achievements. One’s job often defines their person and pecking order in society. Since our culture is now 24/7 and very performance based, we are always in work mode and there is little chance to escape from that identity. Believe it or not, most of the world doesn’t think about work or talk about work at super time! When a person’s identity is seen in one’s job or how much they produce, what happens to that identity when they are laid off, disabled or retired? It is not a healthy life to have your identity hanging in the balance with every task or jitter-inducing free moment. Our identity is not in our work in the Lord’s sight – our relationship with the true God is our identity!

C. God’s view of work
God’s view of work is very different than the utilitarian or identity view of work. God gave work to humans before there was any sin or rebellion. We will work in the renewed earth during the millennium. We will work in the new heavens and earth for eternity. Work is integral to our design as humans made in God’s image. Take away “work” in a human’s life and a part of our humanity is taken away. It isn’t just religious work or Christian work that is highly esteemed by God, but all hard, conscientious work that is legitimate. All work has value because when we work we reflect and imitate Almighty God. As we have said, work refers to any effort that we put out to accomplish a goal outside of play, rest, and leisure … Your chores are work, learning & studying at school are work, running a home is work, serving Jesus is work, if you are disabled or retired, the extra time & effort you put out just to keep going is work. Let’s now focus on John 5.

II. God works, so when we work we reflect our great God who designed us
Here in John 5, Jesus was in Jerusalem for one of the festivals. READ 5:1-2. Jesus walked by a large outdoor pool – this one was called “Bethesda”. It was a very impressive pool as it is surrounded by 5 covered colonnades. Now a colonnade, or portico, is a covered walkway where really large stone columns are holding up that roof over the walkway. We don’t have anything like it in our country – it was an impressive place. READ v 3. There were two reasons why so many disabled people use to hang out there. First because it was a covered, public place so they weren’t out in the hot sun or wet rain. Second, because there was a belief that if you were the first in the pool after a sudden burst of wind stirred up that pool – then God would heal you. This was not true, just a superstition which God always warns us against. Superstition enslaves. So when Jesus asked a man who had been crippled and unable to walk for 38 years, “Do you want to be healed?” all he could answer was how frustrating life was because anytime the water was stirred, someone else would always get in the pool before he could. “Woe is me, everything is stacked against me, my condition is helpless, I’ve done all I can do and it is not close to good enough. No one is helping me like they should.” We have this picture of how life is supposed to go and because that is not what is happening than it is everyone else’s fault and we are helpless. As a side note, the more you or I insist God do things a certain way, the more bondage we are in to our faulty, broken thinking.

Jesus heals the man anyways, but then requires him to do some work – get up and carry your mat. But this was on the Sabbath and the religious leaders were upset at the man carrying his mat on the Sabbath from a public place to where they lived. When they learned Jesus did the healing, instead of it amazing them & challenging them to live a more holy, devoted life, they started attacking Jesus. That is the context of Jesus’ words we read in John 5:17.

READ. God the Father works and so does Jesus who is imitating His Heavenly Father. Now God is trinity – only one God but existing in three persons in that one Godhead – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So Jesus points out very clearly that (1) God is currently working – the idea that God just started the world and then doesn’t have any active role in it today is incorrect. Jesus also points out very clearly that (2) as the Son He rightfully works also because that’s what kids do – they imitate and reflect what their parents do.

Just like Jesus, when we work, we reflect God. When we work, we reflect our Maker. Does it matter what work we are doing? No! If it isn’t “illegitimate work” such as “gambling”, “prostitution”, “extortion” and other unbiblical efforts, then any of our work can be imitating what God does.

Think about that for a moment. Imagine a dull job you have to do – the “why do I have to do this” kind of job – maybe cleaning the toilet, picking up trash, doing endless worksheets at school, taking 30 minutes to get dressed because your body is failing or filling out some time-consuming, required forms that no one is going to look at! In all these boring, often frustrating tasks, we can reflect God. We reflect the Lord when we put effort or energy into accomplishing a task, whatever the task is. (Now if we slack off or grumble while doing it, we are not reflecting God!) Isn’t that an incredible thought – AND so transforming when we begin to see our daily efforts like God looks at them. You can reflect God in making your bed, cleaning your room, and starting to work on time, even if no one else notices. And we
can do something eternally important in those simple actions – we can reflect God and the
greatness of His design!

Not only does this verse remind us that God works, but also work is something we will do a
lot of! “My Father is ALWAYS at work”. God calls for us to work 6 days and rest for one
day as He worked six days and rested for one in the initial creation. And God didn’t stop
working at the end of creation – He is working right now. So work is not this necessary evil
that came after sin entered the world, nor is it something we should spend energy trying to
avoid, but work is something that we will do a majority of each week. **Work is so
fundamental to us as humans, that it is one of the few things in life we can do in
significant amounts without it harming us.** We are made to work, but not continuously.
Proper rest and breaks from work are as essential as work itself to reflect God, but that is
another topic for a different day.

**III. God works, so all legitimate work has value**

Let’s go back to v 17. **READ.** Since God works, Jesus as the One & only Son works and we,
as God’s special creation in His image reflect God by working. That also means all
legitimate work has value. **SO it would be wrong for us to label some jobs as “menial”
while considering other work “prestigious”**. It is true that the outcome of our work will be
different, but the work itself has similar value because we are imitating God. It would also
be unbiblical...

- to picture work as a “necessary evil” **(as we’ve mentioned) –** we will be working in
  the millennium for 1,000 years and the new heaven & earth for eternity
- it’s also unbiblical to put a lot of effort into avoiding work thinking that will make our
  lives richer. All of the Senior citizen publications have warnings about the
devastation that comes from not doing anything after retirement. While most here
will retire from their paid jobs before we die, we never want to retire from work as it
reflects our divine maker.
- and it is unbiblical to spend our whole life accumulating just so we don’t have to
work anymore

Work is a major component of human dignity – it is how God made us. But when we study
history, we find that is not how societies have often seen it. For example, Greek philosophy
was very strong in Jesus’ day. **To the ancient Greeks, work was a curse and nothing else.** A
truly worthwhile life was where a person could be freed from any physical effort and just
devotes themselves to deep thought and contemplation. In fact, they justified slavery on this
basis: slaves are lesser people who are destined to do the physical work so that the elite
could be freed up to do intellectual work and deep thought – sitting around all day just
discussing things. They genuinely believed that slaves were incapable of higher rational
thought so their only purpose on earth was to free up the smarter & more talented people to
pursue a higher life to help society as a whole.
While our modern mind rightly recoils at this idea that some humans are inferior and made to do menial tasks so that others can live a higher life – don’t we have some really messed up views where we see work as something that hinders real life? The difference is that our current American culture has just put “leisure” in the place of “deep thought and contemplation”. How many Americans today see work (whether chores, school, regular service for Jesus or a paid job) as something that stifles real life which to them is being able to be on vacation, play video games, go on-line or text whenever they want? How many Americans expect their friends & family to provide for them, do the chores and take care of the kids so they can play more? While we may not admit it what we believe is that full-time jobs, chores and taking care of others is lesser work keeping one from the higher goal of self-fulfillment through leisure. That is not how we were made – a deeper life is always going to include some kind of work.

Equally true is that many in our culture believe that certain work is below them – that is for other people who aren’t as smart or clever as they are. When these people lose their job, they choose to be unemployed rather than do something to help support themselves. That is not reflecting God! They don’t understand that in God’s sight, any legitimate work put towards a good goal is in itself a great value. Refusing to work a job or do a chore because we believe it is beneath us is actually quite ugly in God’s sight. How ugly to look down on those who do physical work like cleaners, cooks or laborers when God is honored by their work. There are parents who feel they are a failure if their kids don’t go to college because then their kids will only get “lesser jobs.” The dignity of our work does NOT come from the value society places on it, but the dignity of our work comes from how we are reflecting God who works! Adam & Eve were given the job of gardening before any sin came into this world and Jesus’ worked as a carpenter far, far longer than He preached, healed or taught. Those are hardly status jobs in our country today.

So that is our challenge isn’t it? – to understand the dignity of our work from God’s perspective rather than the applause of other people. As Pastor Tim Keller reminds us, “No task is too small a vessel to hold the immense dignity of the work given by God.” Simple physical labor is God’s work just as much as all the study, contemplation and research I did this week to prepare this sermon teaching. We need to regain this basic truth of God that there is an inherent dignity in good work – not just spiritual work or well-paid work or in-vogue work! While the Greek philosophers saw manual labor as lowering humans to the level of animals, the Bible sees all work as differentiating human beings from animals and elevating them to a place of dignity.

I love the quote of Martin Luther King Jr – “If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, ‘Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.” “No work is insignificant. All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence.”
IV. God works, so work is for now, growing up, retirement, disability and eternity

Accomplishing something through work is just as much a human need as food, water, love, faith and friendships. But what of those times in life when we can’t do as much work – like when we are little & growing up or disabled or retired? NONE OF THESE TIMES can be seen as a time of NO WORK or we won’t reflect God and a part of our humanity will be diminished. However, “work” will look significantly different during these times!

Let’s start with the end of our life. Unless we die of some sudden accident or quick disease, we are all heading for a time where we will be weak, bed-ridden, or unable to do much. You may not want to think about it, but just work back from all the obituaries that are in the paper. It doesn’t matter how active you are, how healthy your diet, or how much money you have, you and I will come to a time in our life where we simply can no longer do what we did before and that can last for years. Why is there so little talk about how to be overcomers and live meaningful lives when that comes? We talk all the time about staying healthy or young? We can’t live wisely if we don’t consider this time that most of us will go through.

One of the advantages of having a genetic form of Muscular Dystrophy passed on through my family meant that I knew my muscles would get weaker no matter what I did, so it was much harder to avoid thinking about what will glorify God when I can’t do the things I use to do. For those that are newer, I was in a wheelchair a year ago – in fact this is the week last year (third Sunday in September), that some of you started to notice that I was getting stronger. What I learned over those years was that my perspective about my situation is much more important than my strength or ability. It is God who is all-powerful and it is God whose work I want to join. God can provide all the power needed for any task. I noticed that when I focused on what I could no longer do then I ended up with a discouraged or defeated attitude. But when I wanted to be honor Jesus by joining Him in His work with whatever I could do, then I got to be part of more than I could ever do even when I was my strongest. The EFFORT I put out for a goal is actually more important for eternity than what I can personally accomplish because that effort reflects my Lord and He can multiply the results! Five or 6 years ago I could get dressed fairly quickly like you in less than 5 minutes, but a year and a half ago it was taking 20-30 minutes to do the exact same thing – plus it was far more frustrating and painful! When I focused on what I couldn’t do, how hard it was or how long it took, I ended up defeated even though I did eventually get dressed. But when I gave my effort to honoring Jesus – seeing all that extra time and effort AS WORK reflecting God and actually accomplishing something no matter how small – there was a very different attitude inside. There was value to my day and a value to my efforts and something got accomplished. Work that produces something is essential to ALL of us. It is important for any who cannot work as much as others to still regularly put effort into things ...getting yourself ready, encouraging other people, taking care of yourself as much as possible and serving Jesus. My long term goals changed so I can still join God in His work when I am bed-ridden or feeble or unable to do what I use to do –

- I don’t just want to learn to pray to get things, I want to become so confident in how the Lord works through prayer that I know my prayers will be valuable even when I can no longer even speak out loud.
• I want to have such a sense that God takes our pathetically insignificant but sacrificial actions and multiplies them to do more than we can think or imagine that I can be assured that how I greet someone when I can’t move any muscles, God can use to make a difference in this world.

• I want to learn to apply God’s word so well, that even when I can’t get out of a chair, I can help someone else know how to overcome a major problem in their life.

• I want to have such confidence in Jesus that I know He can use me just being me when I can’t see myself doing anything useful. This is not just some positive thinking – this is living by faith rather than by sight.

Let me end with this story I have told before to show how important our perspective on work is – for us! When I was in seminary, my pastor retired. So a couple of us took several days off to move he and his wife from the Chicagoland area to their new condo in Minneapolis, MN – about an 8 hour drive away. One of my jobs was to drive the car with the pastor’s wife as she couldn’t drive that far. Normally June was very gracious and encouraging, but it didn’t take long to figure out she was in a really, really bad mood and had no desire to move. The idea of having to work yet again cleaning, unpacking and setting up a new home was overwhelming. Nothing I said cheered her up … until we started talking about my jobs during seminary. I had those real status jobs – mopping the floors of a grocery store every morning and cleaning carpets & furniture in the afternoon. Since that was a lot like the work she was dreading, she asked how much I made there. I said I only made 30% of what they charged for my time. “Well, how much do they charge, if you clean a bathroom?” “$18 an hour and I got about 5 ½ dollars of it.” “How much do they charge if you do the living room or kitchen?” “If we bring in our own heavy duty equipment like vacuum cleaners or floor scrubbers it is $24 an hour.” For the next hour, she just kept repeating & confirming those numbers which would be like $40 and $55 an hour today. When we got to Minneapolis, she immediately went over to her husband and said “Harold, do you know how much I’m worth?” He wisely answered, “You’re worth everything to me, honey.” “No, you know how much my cleaning is worth?” He had no idea what was going on. Using our more modern figures now “I’m worth $40 an hour and $55 when I use the vacuum cleaner.” She then tore into the task of cleaning that Condo like a tornado. You have never seen a more motivated person. And the only thing that changed … was her perspective. That’s our privilege as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. How do YOU view the work YOU do? Don’t worry or compare yourself to others. Believe you can please God everyday of your life in the simplest things you do. May you overcome all the faulty thinking you have about work in the power of Jesus!