

**Theme: Work that Fulfils**  
**Text: Various**  
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The theme of today's message is Work that Fulfils. To some of us the idea even of fulfilling work seems to be a contradiction of terms. Work is something we endure, never enjoy. After all, we work to love, not live to work don't we? Almost forty years ago an American author with the unlikely names of Studs Terkel wrote a book simply called, 'Working'. For the book he interviewed hundreds of people about their experience of working. In his introduction to the book he wrote this:

Work, is, by its very nature, about violence—to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.

Now there is a positive affirmation of the value of work!

What I want to demonstrate today is that rather than a curse, work can be experienced as a blessing. Rather than endure work, we can indeed enjoy it. More than that, we can find meaning and purpose in it. To do this I am going to take a walk through the Bible, including Proverbs, to sketch out a theology of work. As we do this, the first thing we discover is that:

### **Work is God's Idea**

Let's read the very first verse of the Bible in Genesis chapter 1, verse 1:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.  
(Genesis 1:1)

Simply put, God worked in forming Creation and continues to work in interacting with it. In the Creation account we discover that over successive periods God created light, water, land, plants, animals and so on. All that God made was good, and so by extension, so too is God's work that made everything.

Our God is a working God. Throughout the Bible work metaphors are used to describe God's activity in our world. God is described as a composer and performer, a metalworker and potter, garment maker and dresser, a gardener and orchardist, a farmer and wine maker, a shepherd and pastoralist, a tentmaker and camper and a builder and an architect.

Our God is a working God and has woven the idea of work into the fabric of Creation. Let me give you an example:

We all know that bees make honey. But do we know the amount of work that goes into making just this one 500 gram jar of honey? To the bees that made this one jar of honey extracted pollen from 2 million flowers. Just to get one load of pollen, a worker bee will need to visit 1500 flowers. To make this one jar of honey, thousands of bees will collectively fly 55,000 miles roaming near and far to find precious pollen. Just for this one jar of honey.

Creation is the result of God's work and work is woven into Creation. God works and God rests. The second thing we discover is:

### **Work was a Blessing**

After God made everything else and declared it all to be good, he formed man out of the dust and declared Creation now completed to be very good. Humanity is created in the image of a working God and so therefore right at the beginning God put us to work. This is what we read:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.  
(Genesis 2:15)

Let's be clear; before sin, humankind worked. Work was part of the original blessing of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve did not sit back in the Garden of Eden chillaxing while they sipped exotic fruit cocktails; God put them to work to take care of the Garden. We were created to work. Work, like everything else before sin entered the world, was one of God's very good blessings.

But we know things went south very early on. Adam and Eve rebelled against God, at the forbidden fruit and with their insurrection, sin entered this perfect world, and with it sin's curse. So we discover, and know personally that:

### **(Hard) Work is a Curse**

The curse of sin is hard work. After their rebellion, God says to Adam:

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground.  
(Genesis 3:19a)

Earlier on, God says to Eve:

I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to your children.  
(Genesis 3:16a)

Imagine that; there once was a day where it appears giving birth was a painless experience. Now I am pretty perceptive. The last time I was in a delivery room I got the impression that giving birth was some of the harder work we can do. Actually, I still have the nail marks in my hand to prove it!

Work was created to be a part of the original blessing of Creation; now it will be experienced as a curse. Just like sin has distorted everything else, so sin has distorted our experience of work.

So far in Genesis we have discovered that work is God's idea, was created as a blessing, and now is often experienced as a curse. What I want to do now is jump to the end before finishing back in the middle. By this I mean I want to explore how work can be experienced by those who profess Christian faith. As we will see, Christian faith transforms our experience of work; what often is felt as a curse can be experienced as a blessing again:

For a Christian:

### **Work is a Privilege**

In Ephesians Paul tells us that:

We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.  
(Ephesians 2:10)

We are God's workmanship. The Greek word translated as workmanship is poiema. Poiema is the root word for the Latin term poetria. Poetria is the Latin root word for poetry. So, another way of expressing Paul's words can be:

We are God's poetry, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...

In other words, we are some of God's best work created to do some of God's best work.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul is writing to the church. He is writing to us. He is saying that as follower of Christ we have a special privilege of doing good works that God prepared for us to do even before we were born, even before we decided to follow Jesus. To experience this kind of work is to experience God's grace. We are privileged.

Sixty years ago Dorothy Sayers wrote an amazing essay on the Christian understanding of work. She offered this definition:

Work is the gracious expression of creative energy in the service of others.  
(Dorothy Sayers)

Work is a high and holy calling. Which brings me to my next point.

### **Work is Worship**

Worship is not what we do for an hour and a quarter in Sunday mornings; worship is what we do with every moment of our lives – including our work and our rest. Romans 12:1 says:

I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your act of worship.  
(Romans 12:1)

With every breath that we draw we have yet another opportunity to worship God with our lives. Every moment we spend on this planet is full of sacred, God-honouring possibilities.

If work is an opportunity to worship the God who created us, and who through Jesus Christ has rescued us from sin, it follows that we should give God the best of what we have. Paul tells the church at Colossi:

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.  
(Colossians 3:23)

Whatever you do....

If you are a student, give your studies your absolute best efforts.

If you are a grandmother, be the best grandmother you are capable of being.

If you are a teacher, inspire your students by your own desire to learn.

If you are a pastry chef, make pastries of such quality and taste that people will travel miles to eat them.

If you are a Barista, always be looking to the next cup of coffee being your best one.

If you are an accountant, well bad luck, but if you are an accountant, fight to protect and grow your clients assets with every ounce of energy you have.

In our ordinary, day in – day out work we have multiple opportunities to worship God – to give God our first and our best.

Six months before his assassination, Martin Luther-King addressed some graduating High school students:

If it falls to your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music, sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well.

Bill Hybels has an axiom which has become a very powerful guiding principle for me. He says:

Excellence honours God and inspires people.

I am committed to becoming the best father I am capable of being, the best husband, the best pastor, the best preacher. I will not give God my leftovers; I will give God my first and my best.

### **Work is a Discipline**

Former US President Ronald Reagan once said:

Hard work never killed anyone, but why take the chance?  
(Ronald Reagan)

For a Christian, work is a privilege and a means by which we can worship God. But work is also a discipline. In a world marred by sin, work can and will be a struggle. A mother getting up in the middle of the night for two-hourly feeds; the manager dealing with conflict in the workplace; the assembly line worker dealing with the monotony of repetition. At such time, giving God our first and our best will be a disciplined choice.

The Book of Proverbs makes repeated warnings against laziness and sloth in contrast to the rewards of disciplined work:

Diligent hands will rule; but laziness ends in slave labour. (Proverbs 12:24)

Here is a vivid image of a person captured by laziness and ill-discipline.

As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth.  
(Proverbs 26:14-15)

By contrast, a Christian seeking to honour God with their work will persevere. They will not give up when the going gets tough. With Christ as our example and the Holy Spirit as our helper, a Christian will not grow weary in doing good, knowing that nothing done for God's honour will be wasted.

The reverse of the claim that for a Christian work is a discipline is also true. Because:

### **Work is a Temptation**

Tim Keller, in his wonderful book *Counterfeit Gods* says:

Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things...Sin is primarily idolatry.  
(Tim Keller)

We can make an idol of our work. Work can be worship but work can also be an idol. We can make this good thing into an ultimate thing that takes the place of God. Even the work we say we do for God can become an idol. Seven years ago that's what happened for me.

Seven years ago I was working as a denominational leader in South Australia. I had a staff of 80 people, was responsible for a budget in the tens of millions of dollars and an investment fund in the hundreds of millions. And I was good at my job. I prided myself on being the 'go-to' guy who could fix any problem, no matter how difficult. And I said I was doing it all for God. But mostly I was doing it for me; my identity, my reputation, my profile. In the end I burned out, at which point by His grace, God began a work of healing in me. Tim Keller says:

If you center your life and identity on your work and career, you will be a driven workaholic and a boring, shallow person. At worst you will lose family and friends and, if your career goes poorly, develop deep depression.  
(Tim Keller)

When we make work an ultimate thing, even when we are successful at it, we still feel a sense of failure.

The film Chariots of Fire dramatizes the story of the two Olympic runners and rivals Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell. As well, Liddell was a very devout Christian who famously refused to run an Olympic final because it fell on the Sabbath. At one point in the film, Liddell expresses his joy in running for God:

I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.  
(Eric Liddell)

For Eric Liddell, his occupation as an elite athlete was not an ultimate thing; it was a means by which he could worship God and enjoy God's pleasure. By contrast, Harold Abrahams was a picture of a man driven to chase success. But making success our ultimate thing is like chasing the wind:

I'm forever in pursuit and I don't even know what I am chasing.  
(Harold Abrahams)

Chasing success and achievement and recognition will only lead to crushing disappointment. For a Christian nothing other than pleasing God will bring contentment.

We are almost at the end. For a Christian, work is a temptation, and ...

### **Work is Neverending**

We live in a culture obsessed with retirement. We plan for retirement, we talk about the places we will go in retirement and we worry about having enough money in retirement.

While one day, God willing, we will cease the need to be in paid employment, a Christian never retires from work. Paul tells the church in Galatia:

Let us not become weary in doing good.  
(Galatians 6:9a)

The Bible has a long roll call of men and women who achieved remarkable things in what we would call their retirement years:

Sarah was 90 and Abraham 100 when Isaac was born.  
Moses was 80 years old when he led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt.  
Samuel was an old man when he anointed David King.  
The Apostle Paul's most productive decade was his last.  
The Apostle John wrote Revelation as an old man in jail on Patmos.

The Bible is overwhelmingly positive about old age. For example, Proverbs states that:

Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained in the way of righteousness.  
(Proverbs 16:31)

Can I hear a hallelujah!

Let me be clear; just because you have retired from paid employment does not mean you stop working. Far from it, your most productive years in serving God may well be in front of you.

At 76 years of age, Gertie Campbell volunteered to help out at her church's youth group. The youth pastor asked Gertie what she would like to do. 'I don't know, she said, God and I will think of something.'

Gertie wasn't a speaker, she felt too old to play games and she didn't want to lead Bible studies or counsel or, heaven forbid, go on camps. But she had a camera, so she took pictures of every kid in the youth group, printed them off and wrote some information about each teenager on the back. She memorized the picture and the information and stood every Friday night at the door of the church to greet every person by name. At the end of the meeting she said goodbye to every person by name with the promise to pray for them that week. Over the years, teenagers came to discover that Gertie knew the bible back to front and so they came to her seeking advice.

Ten years later, at the age of 86, Gertie had three strokes in rapid succession. The youth group kids were distressed at the possibility of losing Gertie. They did not know how they could help her. Then the youth pastor had an idea. He came to Gertie and said, 'Gertie I want to do your funeral.'

'I know,' she said, 'I want you to do my funeral but I am not dead yet.'

'But Gertie, I want to do your funeral while you are alive so that you can hear how much you mean to us', he replied.

So that's what they did. They held a funeral for Gertie while she was still alive. Hundreds of people, many now adults travelled from all over to honor Gertie. They told stories, they laughed and they cried. They loved this woman who had loved them.

At the end of the night some young people gathered at the back of the church. What they knew, everyone knew that Gertie had a weakness for expensive perfume. Estee Lauder's Beautiful was her favorite. The young people walked from the back of the church to the front where Gertie was sitting. Then they showed her what they were hiding. The biggest bottle of Beautiful perfume Gertie had ever seen. Before she could say anything, with hundreds of people watching, they poured every ounce of the perfume over Gertie's uncovered feet, like the woman who anointed Jesus feet, showering Gertie not just with perfume, but with gratitude.

This may come as an even greater shock, but when we die, those who profess Christian faith will continue to work. There is a popular misconception that heaven is a place of fluffy clouds, angels and harps, flowing white robes and endless singing. When you think of heaven you do not think of work. But in Revelation John paints a picture of heaven as a hive of productive activity in which all heaven's inhabitants are engaged in work. This is what we read of the New Jerusalem:

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.

(Revelation 22:3)

We do not go to heaven to escape work but to rediscover the complete blessing that work in service of God was intended to be.

As I said earlier, Christian faith transforms our experience and understanding of work. Work need not be a curse, but can become a blessing. This is all possible because:

### **God's Work is Our Rest**

We worship a God who is always at work. In Genesis, God finishes the work of Creation, sees that it is very good, and rests. But even though Creation is formed, God continues to work. The story of the Bible and indeed the story of history and our lives is that of a God that continues to interact with that which He has made.

Archbishop William Temple put it beautifully like this:

The God of the Bible is a God with His hands in the dirt.  
(Archbishop William Temple)

I love that image! The God of the bible, the God we worship has dirt under his fingernails and calluses on his hands. The Bible records the story of a God who lives a rhythm of work and rest:

In Creation he formed the physical. But creation was marred by sin and the curse of sin was death and included the experience of hard work. But our working God did not turn his back on Creation, rather he launched a Universe wide rescue mission to redeem and restore his world.

And so in the Incarnation of Jesus, God became the Physical. God clothed himself in human form in order to demonstrate his love for us. Because of the curse of sin, we turned our back even on Jesus and so he was crucified on the cross. But God's work did not end there.

Three days after his crucifixion, Jesus rose from the dead. And so in the Resurrection, God has redeemed the Physical. But even with the Resurrection, God has not finished working. We live in the time in between. This is the time in between Jesus resurrection and his return. In this time, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and through the church – people like you and me, God is restoring the physical. The promise of Christian faith is that God is restoring all things; he is making all things new again.

This empty cross symbolises that greatest work ever offered in our world. This is God's greatest work. It is because of this work that we can rest. It is because of this work we can rest.

Many of us get caught up in the lifeless pursuit of trying to earn God's favour; of trying to fill the vacuum in our life through success and achievement. But the truth of the Bible is this; our life is not defined by what we do, but by what God has done. Put another way:

Our identity is not found in what we do for God, but in what God has done for us.

Because God has worked and continues to work for our salvation, we can rest from our ceaseless striving and chasing after the wind and rest in what God has done. When we do this we discover the joy in working to please God rather than appease God.