

# A Life TRANSFORMED

## A Life Transformed Session 4 – Work

### All kinds of work

Ask your group to take 2-3 minutes to make a list of all of the tasks they do in a normal week (both paid and unpaid tasks) and to put a mark next to the ones they consider “work.”

This week’s lesson is about the transformation of our work. Some folks have jobs at which they labor throughout the week and earn an income. Some folks have jobs at which they labor throughout the week and don’t earn an income. God leads us to many kinds of work throughout our lives and the concept of “work” is not limited to paid employment. It is important to note that paid work is not more important than unpaid work, and all have an important role in our world and God’s kingdom. In this lesson, as we examine the role of work in our lives and how God can transform it, be mindful of all work that you do – both paid and unpaid.

In the *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, work is defined as “human activity designed to accomplish something that is needed, as distinct from activity that is satisfying in itself.” It’s important to note that accomplishing something that is needed (work) doesn’t have to be unsatisfying; it’s just that it’s not done for pure satisfaction. Putting your child to bed is work, though it may be enjoyable.

Those two things (work and activities) are often different, but in some cases can be the same thing. If you needlepoint a Christmas ornament for your own tree, that is not work. But if you needlepoint an ornament to sell to earn income for your household, that is work. Same activity, different purposes.

### The gap between Sunday and Monday

Other than sleeping, the average American spends more time working, whether paid or unpaid, than doing anything else. A forty-hour workweek accounts for almost a quarter of a week. Contrast that with the amount of time the average churchgoer spends at church – about 0.5-1% of their week.

As Christians, if we are serious about evangelizing and scattering the church, we can’t just focus on it for just 1% of their week. And we can’t assume that people will do it in their “free time” and think that they are going to do it in the margin that is left after work, dedicating time to their families, cooking, cleaning, laundry, sleeping, etc. There should not be a dividing lines between our work and spirituality. Work is a place that people can live out the great commission (“Go and make disciples of all nations” - Matthew 28:19).

As Jeremy Treat wrote in his book, *Seek First*, God uses our vocations to build the kingdom. When we are salt and light in the industries where the Lord has placed us, God is glorified. We see this play out in scripture over and over again – Joseph held a political appointment, Boaz was a businessman, Nehemiah rebuilt the city walls, Lydia was a salesperson, and Paul was a tentmaker.

It may feel like there is a big gap between Sunday and Monday, but our faith cannot be divorced from our work. Our work matters to God and God matters to our work. God cares about the way that we treat the people with whom we work, the products we make, the ethics of our decision-making, and every other component of our work.

### **What is work? Where did it come from? Why is it so burdensome?**

The origin of work in our Judeo-Christian tradition is unique among ancient cultures. The Greek tale of Pandora's Box describes all of the things that came out when Pandora opened the jar -- greed, envy, hatred, pain, disease, hunger, poverty, war, and death... and work. In the Mesopotamian creation tale, *Enuma Elish*, the gods created the world and then created humans because they saw that the world would require upkeep, something they deemed too demeaning for gods to do.

Right in the opening verses of Genesis, God is working. "In the beginning, when **God created...**" Before we know anything else about God, we know that God is a worker. Not only that, but work is presented as a wonderful thing in which God takes delight. God saw all that God had made and declared it good.

In his marvelous book about discipleship, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Eugene Peterson wrote, "The Bible begins with the announcement, 'In the beginning God created.' Not 'sat majestic in the heavens.' He created. He did something. He made something. He fashioned heaven and earth. The week of creation was a week of work."

After God works, God commissions humans to carry on that work. We are made in the *imago dei*, the image of God, so it makes sense that a part of our human nature would be to would carry on and continue the work that God started. The first work assignment humans are given is in Genesis 1:28, to "fill the earth and subdue it." In Genesis 2:15, they're given the assignment to work and keep the garden. Humans were tasked with caring for, maintaining, and working on the earth that God created. Work was given to humans as a gift, not a curse.

The Hebrew word that is used for "to work" throughout the Old Testament is *avodah*, which also means "to worship." God's original design for humans was that work and worship would not be bifurcated – in fact, we'd worship and venerate God through our work. The orientation of our lives was intended to be towards God in all that we did.

Unfortunately, sin happened and work became burdensome. Remember that God placed Adam and Eve in the garden and told them that they could eat of whatever tree they

wanted, except for one. The serpent tempted them, they ate from the forbidden tree, and they received a punishment from God.

Read Genesis 3:17-19 (NRSV)

<sup>17</sup> And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; <sup>18</sup> thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup> By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Note that work is not part of the curse; it is the ground that is cursed. Sin makes the work more painful, but the idea of work itself is not cursed. Nor was work unfruitful - Adam and Eve were still able to eat from the ground, but it would come with toil and frustration.

### **All work is from God and all work has dignity**

American culture has a tendency to assign varying levels of worth to different kinds of jobs. White collar, professional work is often seen as more important or dignified than manual labor. There was a show on the Discovery Channel for many years hosted by Mike Rowe called *Dirty Jobs*. Rowe would visit with folks whose jobs were marked by discomfort, hazards, or repulsive situations. The show took a voyeuristic approach to the kinds of jobs that are vital to our communities but are often looked on with disdain. This is a poor grasp of the dignity that all work is given by God.

God worked in the dirt and labored to bring about the world and humanity. God was a gardener. Genesis 2:7 tells us that God formed humans from the dust of the ground. Mark 6:3 tells us that Jesus was a carpenter (though, it is more likely that τέκτων should be translated as stonemason, for wood was scarce around the Galilee and he and his father Joseph probably worked with stone). Unlike the Mesopotamian gods in the *Enuma Elish*, manual labor was not beneath God and Jesus. It was their choice. More than anything else, this should tell us that all work has dignity.

As much as we struggle with the concept of work having different levels of worth today, it is not a new problem brought on by our current culture. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there were also great divides in the kind of work that was seen as worthwhile. Many folks believed that the most distinguished work belonged to the monks, priests, and clerics and that anyone who was not doing church work was beneath them. Martin Luther bristled at this notion, preaching and writing extensively about the value and dignity of all work.

"The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but all works are measured before God by faith alone." (Martin Luther, *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*)

Luther argued that it is the measure of faith by which we do our work that gives it value. A priest who performs his work without faith is not fulfilling his calling, but rustic laborer in the field who is faithfully using his gifts is fulfilling his calling.

Further, Luther made the argument that work, no matter what kind, is valuable because it allows us to love our neighbors. Luther said that God could have given grain and fruit without plowing and planting, but chose to provide for humankind through their vocations. He called workers “the fingers of God” because each worker is an agent of providential love.

### **Work shapes our identity**

Think back to the last time you met someone new. In the first few minutes of conversation, did one of you say, “so what do you do?” If not, your conversation would be in the minority of most getting-to-know-you conversations. The work someone does (paid or unpaid) is often seen as the most interesting or important thing about them.

We talked about this at length a few weeks ago in lesson 1, but it’s important to remember that for us as Christians, we need to move away from the idea that our identity is based on our work. Fortunately, our faith gives us an anchoring point that is separate from work. Without that, any failure at work could wreak havoc on our souls.

### **Bad news: work can be a selfish endeavor**

We often refer to our careers as our vocations. The root word for vocation is the Latin word *vocare*, which means “to call.” This means that a job is really only a vocation if you’re called to do it by someone else or for someone else rather than yourself. Tim Keller writes, “Our work can be a calling only if it is reimagined as a mission of service to something beyond merely our own interests.” (*Every Good Endeavor*) Our work, no matter what it is, should be a contribution to our community and the kingdom but it is often just a means of self-advancement and self-fulfillment.

Someone who is focused on self-advancement may be tempted to cut corners in order to make more money. They may be more willing to lie or throw a colleague under the bus in order to gain an advantage. They may not consider the impact their decisions have on the folks around them. They may prioritize their own glory over the good of the company or organization.

Read Genesis 11:1-4 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. <sup>2</sup> And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup> And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. <sup>4</sup> Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

The people’s motivation was to make a name for themselves. They thought that if they proved their strength, power and ingenuity to God that they would be able to prevent themselves from being scattered abroad the face of the earth. They saw the tower as a means of securing their autonomy and personal interests. We learn from them that our work is in vain when it is done for our own benefit rather than for the greater good.

### **Good news: work has eternal significance**

When JRR Tolkien was writing *Lord of the Rings*, he got a case of writer's block that was so bad he abandoned the manuscript. He started working on something else, *Leaf by Niggle*, as a way of distracting himself from his struggle. The protagonist, Niggle, is an artist who dreams of a beautiful tree. He makes it his life goal to paint the tree, but it's slow going because Niggle is a perfectionist and keeps getting caught up on individual leaves. He dies before he can finish the painting, but when he gets to heaven, he sees his tree. Tolkien wanted to convey that our work is not in vain and that our work will be fulfilled in God's future.

Paul writes to the Corinthians, "in the Lord, your labor is not in vain." Whatever our work is, if we are doing it faithfully and for God's glory, our work shows the Kingdom of God to the folks around us. We may never know in this lifetime which parts of our work have eternal significance, but we have to trust that they do.

In his prayer book, *Every Moment Holy*, Douglas Kaine McKelvey wrote a prayer about the unknown of the work of parenting:

In such menial moments as this - the changing of a diaper - I would remember this truth: My unseen labors are not lost, for it is these repeated acts of small sacrifice that - like bright, ragged patches - are slowly being sewn into a quilt of lovingkindness that swaddles this child. I am not just changing a diaper. By love and service I am tending a budding heart that, rooted early in such grace-filled devotion, might one day be more readily-inclined to bow to your compassionate conviction - knowing itself then as both a receptacle and reservoir of heavenly grace. Open my eyes that I might see this act for what it is from the fixed vantage of eternity, O Lord- how the changing of a diaper might sit upstream of the changing of a heart; how the changing of a heart might sit upstream of the changing of the world. Amen

Who hasn't wondered, at the end of an exhausting or frustrating day of work, whether any of it actually matters? If we can't see an immediate impact or payoff, it's hard to continue to do our work in patience, hoping that we will eventually be rewarded. The problem is that we are always focused on our own reward, rather than the reward of kingdom building. We have to shift our focus from self-interest to God's interest.

As Christ followers, we are called to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the Kingdom. We point people to God through our love and do the work of bringing peace, justice, and restoration to the world. Our jobs are not categorically eternally significant, but it is *the way we approach* our work that has eternal significance.

NT Wright writes, "What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—*will last into God's future*. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether... They are part of what we may call *building God's kingdom*." (*Surprised by Hope*)

## **So how should we approach work?**

When you ask Christians what it means to them to be a Christian at work, you might get answers like, “I keep my Bible on my desk and sometimes people ask me about it” or “I work hard to earn money so I have enough to give away” or “I pray for the people I work with.” But, as we discussed at the beginning of the lesson, many folks are stumped because they have mentally separated their faith from their work. In order to overcome that bifurcation, we have to connect our faith and work in practical ways that we can live out each day.

### Work hard

In Colossians 3:23-24, Paul writes, “<sup>23</sup> Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, <sup>24</sup> since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.”

Work hard. Not for your boss. Nor for your paycheck. Nor for your personal advancement. Do it for God. Strive for excellence, not because you’re a perfectionist, but because it means you’re giving God your all. Go the extra mile. Be the most honest, most loyal, most dependable, and most humble employee. If the folks around you know you’re a Christian and that you work competently, people will wonder what makes your work distinct and it will glorify God.

“If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as 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.” - Martin Luther King, Jr.

### Work as salt and light

Paul wrote to the Ephesians that they should work as Christ’s servants *not only when being watched* (Ephesians 6:6). Too often, people take shortcuts or lower their standards when they think they’re not being watched. As Christians, we are meant to work with focus, ethics, and integrity no matter who sees us.

Most of us are not going to have the opportunity to share the gospel explicitly in our workplaces. However, living and loving like Jesus in our workplaces is the strongest witness we can share. Honesty and kindness do not go unnoticed. When we treat others with dignity and respect, it makes an impact.

On the other hand, Proverbs 18:9 says, “Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys.” Doing a bad job at your job brings destruction. It is also a bad advertisement for Christianity. If we proclaim Jesus as Lord but blow off our work, we’re actually saying that we see ourselves as lords.