

Rev. Shaun Arndt
Sunday, September 3, 2023
Ecclesiastes 2:20-25, 4:4-8

Who are you working for?

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

You load sixteen tons and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt. So goes an old song about the frustrations of work. An 80's song puts it this way: You can get to work by nine And start your slaving job to get your pay.

Such songs exist for a reason. Depending on what surveys you believe, only about half of Americans are satisfied with their jobs. And even those who express overall satisfaction with their jobs speak of areas of stress and frustration with their work. The last few years have introduced new words to the workplace like “quiet quitting” and “rage quitting.”

The Bible book of Ecclesiastes teaches us **There is nothing new under the sun** (1:9) when it comes to work frustrations. 3,000 years ago one of the wisest men who ever lived, King Solomon asked: **What does a man gain through all his hard work, through all the turmoil in his heart, as he works so hard under the sun? Pain fills all his days. His occupation is frustration. Even at night his heart does not rest. This too is vapor.**

But then shockingly, just a few verses later, the same author, writing by the Holy Spirit says the exact opposite: **There is nothing better for a man than to eat and to drink and to find joy in his work.**

So how can work be as “meaningless” as a **vapor** of breath that disappears before your eyes, filled with **pain and frustration** and yet also be one of the best things in life and a source of **joy**? Well, it all comes down to how you answer the question: **Who are you working for?**

So why does work so often come with **pain, turmoil and frustration**? The problem is not work in itself. Work is a good gift of God. Even in the Garden of Eden, when all was perfect, God gave the first man and woman meaningful work to do as they took care of the garden.

But like it does with everything else, sin robbed work of meaning and joy. When our first parents rebelled, God spoke of the painful results of sin on human life, including work: **The soil is cursed on account of you. You will eat from it with painful labor... Thorns and thistles will spring up... by the sweat of your face you will eat bread until you return to the soil... For you are dust, and to dust you shall return**

Thorns and thistles can describe the troubles in jobs other than farming and gardening. Every job has its “**thorns**” and “**thistles**”, the frozen bolt the mechanic can’t budge, the copying machine that jams, the rude and demanding customer. Sin has turned work into *painful labor*.

So now if you try to find lasting meaning, purpose and satisfaction in work and what you can accomplish, you will end up **chasing after the wind**, never reaching your goal, because of things like this: **A man who has worked hard... must hand over whatever he accumulated by all his hard work to a man who has not worked hard for it.**

A person takes pride in their work and makes great accomplishments. But age or death means they will have to leave it all to someone else who may not appreciate it or may even destroy it all. Maybe a person pours their heart and soul into building up a company, but the next person who takes over runs it into the ground. Or a couple builds their dream house, landscaped and decorated just so, but the next owner tears it all out!

Or there’s this: **I also saw that all hard work and all accomplishment are the result of a person's envy of his neighbor.** If our reason to work is to get more than others, to have the latest and the greatest toys, then your work will never be done. There will always be something else to get or someone who has more than you.

And it can even be harmful to life: **There was a person all alone... and there was no end to all his hard work. His eyes also were not satisfied with wealth. “So for whom am I working so hard,” he asks, “and depriving myself of enjoyment?”** Lives, families and health can be ruined by stress and overworking.

Yet laziness isn’t the answer either, because Solomon tells us: **The fool idly folds his hands and eats his own flesh** (that is destroys himself)!

Who are you working for? If the answer for self, for pleasure, just to get ahead, just to work, then you will never find lasting meaning in work or life, but it will elude you, even if takes until death when you lose everything you worked for.

Now the fact Solomon can say **There is nothing better for a man than to eat and to drink and to find joy in his work**, tells us the problem is not work. The problem is... us!

The problem is God is holy and we are not. Our relationship with the Giver of all good has been shattered by sin – the sinful condition we inherit from our parents, the sins it leads us to commit every day in heart, word and action.

The problem is one moment we sin by laziness and neglect and the next moment by overworking because our sinful hearts lead us to start looking for meaning and purpose in the wrong places.

Each thumb hit with a hammer, every inconsiderate customer, every employee slacking off, each pain and ache from work, every weed in the field, every frustration that comes at school, home or office is a constant reminder that we are sinners who have only earned one thing: **the wages of sin is death**—death in debtor’s prison of hell with **pain and grief** for all eternity.

So where shall we find the answer to our horrible, sinful problem that condemns us? Why, in work of course. No, not our work. We know that could never be, not when the prophet tells us **all our righteous acts are like a filthy cloth** (Is 64:6) and the Apostle says: **it is by grace you have been saved...not by works.**

The answer *is* found only in Jesus Christ, the Lord God who came into this world to do the *work* that saves us!

For your sake and mine, the Son of God became a human being and humbled himself to a life of long and hard work to rescue us. Even as a child, Jesus was perfect in the work God gave him of joyfully learning God’s Word and obeying His parents.

Mark 6 tells us Jesus’ first occupation was carpenter. Just think, for you, the All Powerful Lord who created the tallest Redwoods and vast jungles chose to sweep up saw-dust and let sweat run down his holy brow as he measured, cut and sanded beneath the hot sun!

For more than three years Jesus served as the perfect preacher and teacher to provide the holiness that covers the failures of this preacher and teacher.

Jesus never looked down on any job as too small or unworthy of him, whether it was blessing little babies or washing his disciples’ feet. And though he never slacked off, neither did Jesus sin by being a workaholic, but took the time needed to rest His body and also rest His soul as He took time away to pray to the Father in quiet places. All this Jesus did for you and me to provide us with the perfect work we all lack.

To rescue us Jesus took up His great work of carrying that heavy cross along with the weight of the whole world’s sins - all laziness, envy, overwork along with every sin that separates us from God. To prove all sin and guilt is removed, Jesus work continued with rising to life on Easter morning to declare us forgiven and at peace with God.

On account of the Holy Spirit’s work of bringing us to trust in Jesus’ saving work, we will not receive the wages of sin we deserve: eternal life, but instead will enjoy forever what Jesus’ perfect work earned for us: **The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Ro 6:23).

Now, we will live with Christ in the New Heavens and New Earth in the perfect life forever free from *thorns and thistles, pain and death* in the life and rejoicing that will never end.

Jesus' saving work has changed our eternal future. His saving love has also changed our lives and our work right now, so that as believers in Christ we can say along with Solomon: **There is nothing better for a man than to eat and to drink and to find joy in his work. This too, I saw, is from God's hand. For who can eat or enjoy himself apart from him?**

Food, drink, enjoying God's gifts, finding satisfaction in the work God gives us to do is truly all a gift of God, a gift that flows from knowing the true meaning and purpose of our lives comes not from work, not from ourselves, but from our Savior Jesus and the status of child of God He has given us!

When we find our meaning, purpose and satisfaction in Jesus alone, we also can find satisfaction in the work He gives us, wherever he has placed us in life: whether as students or teachers, parents or children, workers or employers.

As a believer in Jesus, your life is set free from trying to work your way back to God, because that work of saving you has been completed by the work of Jesus. Now whatever work God gives us to do guided by His Word, is something we get to do in the freedom of forgiveness, a way to express our love, and thanks and praise to the God who saves us!

And so mowing the lawn, changing a diaper, cooking dinner, shoveling the snow, doing a worksheet of math problems at school, recording numbers in a spreadsheet, greeting and serving a customer, mopping the floor, turning a wrench, taking out the garbage, responding to a 911 call, answering the telephone, helping mom with the dishes, carrying in the groceries for your wife... all of these now have meaning, done in thanks and love for our Savior whose work alone gives us eternal life!

And since the sin that still accompanies even a believers' works is not counted against because of Jesus, God is truly delighted by what we do for others and for him. Yes your Dear Lord smiles and remembers what His children do in thanks for his gift of eternal life! The greatest satisfaction and only lasting purpose to all our work comes when **we work for the Lord** in all we do!

Of course even as we work for the Lord in all we do, sin and thorns and thistles still remain this side of heaven, but even these remind us we're not in heaven yet and teach us to continue to look to Jesus alone for peace, forgiveness and the power to each day work for the Lord who loves us! Amen.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to (Jesus) be glory forever and ever! Amen.

We praise the Lord God who saves us and gives our lives meaning as they are lived in him by using the *We Praise You, O God* on page 210 in the hymnal.