

Who Do You Work For?

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This is Labor Day weekend. Labor Day is a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country. President Grover Cleveland declared it a national holiday in 1894.

As we celebrate the significance of work this weekend, I want us to consider how our faith intersects our daily work. If you are a student, then your work is going to school. This message applies to everyone in school as well those who have jobs inside and outside the home. It also applies to those who are retired.

God is the first worker we see in the Bible! Let's see him at work!

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:27-28)

If you attend church, Sunday school and participate in a small group 2 or 3 times per month, you will spend an average of about 90 hours in those activities in the next year. If you work a standard 40-hour week, you will spend over 2,000 hours working next year. If you work a 50-hour week, you spend 2,500 hours working next year. (Allowing two weeks vacation!)

Does that mean that you spend only 90 hours in sacred activities and over 2,000 hours in secular activities? We have a tendency to view those activities that we do at church: worship, Bible study, small groups and ministries as sacred. We view everything else like work, recreation and school as secular activities. The sacred activities belong to God. The secular activities belong to us. And never the twain shall meet! What I want us to consider today is how our faith intersects our everyday life that we normally consider secular. I wonder if God see this distinction when he looks at our lives? Is all of life included in God's Kingdom? Is God just as engaged in our lives at work and school as he is in church and our daily

devotional times? The Bible teaches that the primary place where we live out our faith is at work and school. Your work matters to God.

In the opening chapter of the Bible we see God working. He makes the stars, the planets, animals and human beings. He works six days and then he rests for one. That is a rhythm that is built into the fabric of the universe and into our bodies. We may work five days at our paying job and then work one day doing stuff around the house and running errands. But we still basically work six days. If work did not matter to God why would he set this rhythm: six days of work to one day for rest and worship? If what mattered to God was just worship and church, he would have reversed the pattern: 6 days at church and 1 day for work!

Our work is significant to God. Work is God's idea. He commanded Adam and Eve to "subdue" the earth. Some translations say to "dress, till and keep the earth." They were given the responsibility of taking care of the environment, the land and the animals. God said, "Get to work."

You were created to be productive and to contribute to God's world. Your work has intrinsic value in the eyes of God. Jesus uses worker terminology to describe who he is: a carpenter, a shepherd, a farmer, a pruner of vineyards. In God's eyes there is no sacred or secular. All of life including our work is sacred which means it belongs to him. If you are retired, God still intends for you to work—to be productive and contribute to his world. You may not have a 9-5 paid job, but you can find ways to make a difference—even if homebound, you can pray without ceasing! Many retired persons tell me the work they do now they consider more productive and fulfilling than the job they did for 40 years. Moses and Abraham contributed their greatest work for the Kingdom of God after they were 80 years old!

Some people have the false idea that work is a necessary evil. It is something I have to do to earn money so I can do the things I enjoy doing: going to TTU athletics, participating in sports, traveling, hunting, fishing or donating to things I believe in. I have to work in order to do those things. This is the view that the Romans had of work. The word “labor” is a Latin or Roman word which originally meant hardship, pain, toil. There is a reason they call the period of time right before childbirth: “labor!” The Romans viewed work as something painful, something to be avoided. The Bible views work as something meaningful and good; joining with God in caring for his creation.

Who is your boss? I’ve had some good bosses. I look forward to going to work, excited about each day. I’ve had some bad bosses. I dreaded going to work and did not give 100 percent. However, when we look at our work as God’s idea and his gift to us, then God is our ultimate boss. Perhaps you’ve seen the bumper sticker: “I work for a Jewish Carpenter.” When we look beyond our earthly boss to our heavenly boss, then we can find fulfillment even when we have a lousy boss.

The Apostle Paul lived in a period when slavery was common—the Romans practiced slavery. The New Testament does not condone slavery. Throughout the Bible there are references to treating people with equality rather than as property. Paul said, “In Christ there is neither slave nor free.” We are all equal in Christ. But because slavery existed, Paul wanted to help the slaves who became Christians to see that even their work mattered to God. The slaves did not like their bosses or the demeaning work they were forced to do. They were often mistreated, beaten and abused. Paul called the lowest workers on the scale to view even their work as an offering to God! Their work mattered to God.

²² Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, ²⁴ since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are

serving. Colossians 3:22-24

It changes how we work when we realize that ultimately we work for God. Our aim is to honor and serve him in everything we do. We have the opportunity to begin each day and give it to God. “Lord, today belongs to you. Use me today at work or school to touch someone’s life, to encourage someone. May the way I work bring honor to you.” This enables us to approach every meeting, every task, every person we encounter as a way to serve God and honor him.

We approach our work as “unto the Lord.” Whether we are a doctor, lawyer, a teacher, a salesperson, a custodian, a factory worker; we work for God. Every task is a love offering to him. God is not a cruel boss whose approval we have to earn by performing well. He is not the boss who drives us into the ground with the constant message, “That’s not good enough. Try harder. Do more.” God loves us and accepts us as we are. Out of gratitude for the love and grace he has shown us, we do our work as a way to thank him and honor him.

Does the way you do your work or your homework after school reflect your gratitude to God? When you work you are not just working for yourself—to be successful, to be powerful, to be wealthy, to acquire things you want. Even if you are self-employed you do not work for yourself, you work for God!

God created the world good. He gave us freedom to choose good or evil. We strayed from God’s plan and chose our own path. Evil, sin and death came into the world. All of us have chosen to go our own way—we have chosen to rebel against God’s plan. We were created in the image of God, but because of our separation from God that image is marred and broken. Sin affects everything—including our work. As a result, abuses and exploitation creep into the workplace.

The Congo is one of the richest nations on earth in terms of natural resources. The colonial practices of Belgium literally raped the country of its natural resources for decades without putting anything back. When the Congo became independent, dictators continued to exploit people and reap personal wealth from the land. The people continued to suffer. We saw a contrast in how two companies operating in the Congo treated the people and the land.

The Chinese are building a road next to the mission station so that the mining trucks will have a paved road to get their products to market. They purchased from the government gravel rights to a hill on the mission station land. One afternoon we heard an explosion that rocked every house on the mission station. Plaster fell from ceiling. The Chinese had set off a blast to harvest the gravel. There was no warning. People could have been hiking up the mountain. Life is expendable—unimportant. All they want is the gravel. Their blasting may cause the well on the mission station to cave in. It will leave an eyesore where once was a beautiful hill covered with vegetation.

On the other hand, we visited a copper and cobalt mine operated by an American Company. It has a totally different philosophy. Twenty percent of their net profits are given back to improve the community. They have built schools, clinics and improved housing and gardens for the residents around the mine. They are carefully removing and storing rare vegetation so they can replant it following the mining operation. Safety of their workers and those in their area is their top concern, no matter the cost. They are bringing healing and justice to a corner of the world—and hope.

How can our workplaces bring healing and justice to our corner of the world? In the past couple of years we've seen what corporate greed can do to bring our economy to the brink of collapse. Unsound lending policies led to the collapse of the mortgage industry and

the fallout in the stock market. While the executives of these financial institutions were collecting exorbitant bonuses, they were causing thousands of people to lose their jobs and their homes. Many banks declared bankruptcy. Most of the banks in Lubbock chose not to participate in the greedy loan practices and even though they experienced some serious struggles, they were able to survive because they chose to act justly.

Some of you own your own businesses. Some of you work for international corporations. How can you use your work to bring justice and healing? It means that we pay our workers fairly and provide adequate benefits for them. But beyond that it means we ask, "Are the policies and practices of our business doing the right thing? Are we helping people or hurting people in the name of the bottom line?" Jesus came not only to save souls, but to save the world. How can our work be a place that brings healing, justice and hope to our corner of the world?

Your primary job is to be an ambassador for Jesus Christ in his world. That means we do our work with excellence to honor God. It means we choose the right thing in our work. It means that we build relationships with people. We care for people and invest time in them. We pray for people we know at work and school who are not experiencing God's love and grace. We ask God to use us to be the link between that person and him. Perhaps he will open a door for us to share our faith. Perhaps a natural opportunity will open up to invite someone to church or our small group. You may be the only connection between that person and God. Your primary job is to be an ambassador for Jesus Christ every day.

If you see someone struggling, take time to ask them, "What's going on? Would you like to talk about it?" Then just listen. We do not have to be Bible thumping evangelists who quote scripture and turn people off. We build relationships and pray for God to open the door. We don't knock down the door.

If a co-worker or employee is in the hospital or experiences the death of a family member, go see them. You might say as you leave, “I’m praying for you and your family. Would it be OK if I prayed for you right now?” If they say “no”, it is OK. If they say, yes, realize that your prayer may be the only one they will hear during this time of crisis.

I love all the mission opportunities we make available in this church. I hope each of you will go on a mission trip to see the needs. I hope each of you will participate in a local outreach at least once a month. These open our eyes to the suffering of the world and those around us. As important as those are, the greatest impact our church can have on the world in the next year will occur in the 2,000 hours you spend at work as an ambassador for Jesus Christ. Your work everyday makes a difference for the Kingdom of God.

You are the light of the world. Jesus calls you to follow him in all of life—especially your daily work. Will you work for him? Will you work for healing and justice? Will you be an ambassador for Jesus Christ in your workplace and at school?