

Pray... Discuss...

(Slide) “We sit forever with Christ that we may walk continuously before men.” Today we’re going to talk about what we do when we are rested. We work, or walk as Watchman Nee would say. We cannot work with any satisfaction or eternal productivity unless we have rested in all that God, through Jesus Christ, has done for us.

So, let’s discuss the “walking”, the working.

What is work? Discuss...

The simple definition from Merriam-Webster’s dictionary is: *activity in which one exerts strength or faculties to do or perform something*. That is a fairly broad definition of work, isn’t it?

According to this definition, anything I do toward a purpose is work. When I make my bed or write a blog post, it’s work. I’m working when I clean the bathroom or prepare for a retreat like this one. When I shop for birthday presents or communicate via emails or prepare dinner for my family, I’m working. Those of you who have small children, when you mop up a spill or make the umpteenth peanut butter sandwich or pick up the legos for the 10th time that day, it’s work.

John Stott defined work from a biblical perspective as “the expenditure of energy (manual or mental or both) in the service of others, which brings fulfillment to the worker, benefit to the community and glory to God.” (Quoted in *How Then Should We Work?*, kindle version, page 80)

With that definition, cleaning the bathroom or picking up legos are definitely done in the service of others, but it’s a little harder to imagine how they bring *fulfillment* to the worker. (Maybe it’s just me, but I was never terribly fulfilled cleaning the bathroom.) I think Stott was focused on a narrower definition of work, and he’s a man, so he may not have thought of toilet training or wiping up spilled milk.

(Slide) For our discussion today, I’d like to use the broad definition of work as *activity in which one exerts strength or faculties to do or perform...something*. Because I suspect all of us do a lot of “somethings.” And it’s all work.

I’d like to challenge us all to look at work through new eyes this morning. I hope you’ll see work as a broader, more fulfilling and more godly activity. (Slide)

1. What is work? (Just did that 😊)
2. God’s plan for our work

3. Work and Identity – are you what you do?
4. Work and Reward – live to work or work to live?
5. Your Vocational Power

God's plan for our work

Work is a tremendous *gift* from God. We're back in Genesis again, because work is present in the creation story, both God's work and our call to work.

"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...God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.'" Genesis 1:28, 31

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

We were created to *fill* the earth and subdue it, to rule over it. After thousands of years of human living the earth is pretty full, isn't it? (I'm not sure how subdued it is, however.) We were created to fill the earth, not just with people but with products, with buildings, with art and medication and books, with culture.

Theologians talk about two threads of human history that are "decreed and ruled by God: Culturative history...and redemptive history..." (*Plowing in Hope*, by David Bruce Hegeman, p. 21.) Redemptive history is the work of God in creating the nation of Israel, of sending Jesus Christ into the world when the time was right, and the work of sharing the news through his Holy Spirit to this day. That's what your church, appropriately, concentrates on.

But there is another stream of history alluded to in the Bible: Culturative history. It's clearly not the primary plot line, but it is a very interesting thread of history and of biblical truth. God gave us the command to fill the earth, and our work is how we do that.

It's no accident that the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city.

When the earth was created there were no buildings, roads, cars, or space crafts. There were no microwave ovens, refrigerators, or indoor plumbing. Those poor people had to make due without television, computers, x-box, Netflix, Alexa and smart phones. No books or movies or amusement parks either.

Think of all the medical advances we have experienced – I am particularly thankful for a few of them - all the knowledge humans have accumulated over the years, all the ways that good people doing good work have made our lives far more productive, healthier and enjoyable.

I firmly believe that God delights in man's creativity. I picture his joy when we figure something out, when we invent something that will benefit humanity, or when we learn something new just like a parent or grandparent appreciates when a child learns to read or to pitch a baseball or to work out an algebra formula.

One could see all of one's work as worship of God; service to God. In fact, work, service, and worship are all different translations of the same Hebrew word, *abad*. Worship, work and service; three words that have all been translated from the same Hebrew word and three words that should characterize our lives as Christians.

We worship God, who has done all the work for us. *All of it*. That is always our starting point. From that standpoint we can work out what God has created for us to do, as Ephesians 2:10 makes clear. "*We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*"

If our work can be considered our worship, and if God prepared work for us to do, then we are ultimately working for God, not for our boss, not for our spouse, not for ourselves, but for God. Once we have that clear understanding, then we can work with a goal of serving others and serving the world. We do not work to serve ourselves; we work as we join God in his work thereby serving others.

God's view of work is that *he* works. Jesus said he is always working (John 5:17). He created us in his image to work with him. It is good, very good, to be a co-worker with Him building on the foundation of his Son, Jesus Christ.

(Slide) Colossians 3:23 says, "*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.*"

Personal story of *whatever you do...*

Identity – are we what we do?

What gives you the most sense of identity? Your job? Relationships? Discuss...

When a dearly loved uncle died a couple years ago, my cousin, who is a journalist, wrote this about his dad: "Dad's life wasn't complicated, it was simple: faith, family, friends. Serve the Lord, serve others. When we were putting his obituary together, we couldn't imagine listing where he worked or even what he did for a living. It was important to him, *but it never defined him.*" I think my uncle had it right.

It is easy to forget that, though, because our work is so central to who we are, we spend so much time at it, that it's easy to become identified with our work.

As Christians, we have only one core identity: *we are children of God*. It is only of secondary importance what we do with our careers or what hobbies we have or how much money we make; we are nothing more or less than God's children. That is enough. That's all that really matters.

That is at the same time humbling and empowering. *In that order.*

(Slide) "For the Christian, life without work is meaningless; but work must never become the meaning of one's life. We must find our identity in Christ, not in our work." (*How Then Should We Work*, kindle version, p. 84)

I'd encourage you to take a little time today and remove your paid and your unpaid work from the picture of your life, then ask yourself where your identity lies. My experience of the last couple of years...

Jesus Christ has made a way for us to be called children of God and that is what we are, he has done everything for us. If we truly *rest* in the truth of those statements, then we have the correct identity.

I have to rest in Christ before I can walk before men. When I remember that Jesus Christ has done it all for me and that I can only work with him and for him, my self-assessment is much more likely to be realistic.

Rest first. Rest in everything Jesus has done for you. Then work with all your heart to the glory of God.

So far we've settled that God gave us work as a blessing, that we get to work alongside of Him, and that we worship God and serve him and serve others through our work. We also know that our work is important, but it is not our identity. Next we'll consider the reward for our work – both in this world and in the next.

Work and Reward Let's face it, we need to work in the economy because we need to eat, we need a warm home here in Chicago, we need clothes and the ever important shoes, and while not in the same category as food we need to have a little fun. There is a monetary reward to working, and I believe God desires to bless us through our work.

There is nothing wrong with earning a fair wage for your work. For some people that is a lot of money; for others a fair wage is just enough to get by. Of course, this world is not always fair, and there are many people who are over-paid and many more who are under-paid. God knows that, and he is capable of taking care of his people whatever their income.

Our work also carries with it a certain status or value. There's a pecking order about work, if we're honest. Would you be more impressed if you met a supreme court justice or a random IT professional; a movie star or a banker; a famous novelist or a preschool teacher? I admit, I would be more interested in those with the impressive jobs. I'm sorry to say it, but it's true.

And in Christian circles we can over-value the roles of pastor, evangelist, missionaries, para-church workers, while undervaluing the people who work in regular, 9-5, secular jobs. Tom Nelson, in his book *Work Matters*, describes this as "work dualism." He describes it as seeing "...through a bifurcated lens in the form of a two-story world. The upper story is seen as a higher vocational calling, one devoted to the church or religious or sacred work. The lower story is viewed as a lower vocational calling, one devoted to secular work." (p. 44)

God does not look at our work in any of those ways. I think our work's "value" is computed on a completely different scale in God's eyes. We tend to value jobs based on their status, their income potential, on rare or extreme talent or ability,

and on what the culture values: sports, entertainment, etc. Those are all worldly values; not God's values.

I am quite sure that God values them differently. In fact, I think we'll all be surprised by God's value system when we get to heaven one day. There will be a lot of people who had jobs that never got any attention or made terribly much money but that had a tremendous impact on the earthly or eternal lives of many people or that were just done so very well.

(Slide) Back to Colossians 3:23-24, "**Whatever** you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward." The link here is between doing whatever you do *for the Lord* and receiving an inheritance *from* the Lord. That means no matter what our education, we can work for the Lord; no matter what our capability, we can work for the Lord; no matter what our physical gifts or handicaps, we can work for the Lord.

Illustration....

In our materialistic society, it's easy to focus on our earthy reward, our income or our status, and forget that the ultimate reward we are working for is from the Lord. He is wildly generous, and he has blessed most of us in this country far beyond what we deserve.

God gave us work as a blessing; we get to work alongside of Him; we worship God and serve him and serve others through our work. Our identity is not in our work, and we will receive a reward for our work from the Lord one day.

Vocational Power Amy Sherman wrote a book about five or six years ago called *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good*, and reading it challenged quite a few of my ideas about work. I highly recommend the book.

Sherman talks about Christians learning to use their vocational power, their skills, influence, knowledge, platform, and networks for God's Kingdom. If work and service and worship are all related, as we saw that they are, and if God has given you the skills, the education, the gifts to accomplish good work, then it all adds up to vocational power.

Sherman advocates that we keep in mind that the power of our work may be invested God's Kingdom in addition to earthly kingdoms. Let me be quick to say that that does *not* mean that we all need to quit our jobs to work for the church. That's not as easy or as satisfying as we might think, as my husband will tell you.

What using our vocational power for God's kingdom *does* mean is that we all need to take a look around and ask ourselves what our life's work has prepared us to do and how our work or skills or resources can serve others.

One example of this attitude toward work is Perry Bigelow, a Christian and founder of a home building company here in Chicago. Out of a desire to encourage

community, his neighborhoods have extra wide sidewalks and lots of common space. “Bigelow also follows...deliberate product diversity and what Perry calls ‘compact development.’ This approach blesses the school district and the local municipality. Here’s how: By offering diverse styles of homes with prices ranging from \$150,000 to \$350,000, Bigelow subdivisions create demographic diversity. Singles, retirees, and families all live in a community.” *Kingdom Calling*, p. 61

That is done intentionally and is counter to many of the subdivisions I see being developed. It sounds incredibly healthy to me.

That’s just one small example of how someone is using his work to bless the world. All of you bless the world through your work.

The one problem with books like *Kingdom Calling* is that the examples used are all of people who have been very successful, have lots of cash, and plenty of self-determination. You might think, well, if I owned a company I’d do that too...but I don’t. I’m going to work every day in a large corporation and am just one of hundreds of employees doing their jobs. Or I’m home with a couple toddlers every day - What am I supposed to do?

You bless the world no matter what you do if you do it for God. That corporation couldn’t do what they do without you doing your job, and doing it well. And, those toddlers? They need your care right now, and one day they won’t be toddlers anymore and your care for them will position *them* to begin blessing the world. That will happen sooner than you think!

I just want to plant this idea in your minds. Read the book if you’re interested. Think about it. You may be in a position to do something soon, or you may need to wait until your kids get a little older, but I would encourage you ponder your vocational power.

Sherman tells another story about Margaret Powell, who was trained as an English teacher but had decided to homeschool her children and put her work on hold. Her church had been taking on the job of helping a local school in a desperately poor area, and when she could she began volunteering to help kids who were having trouble reading. “What I’m doing now is the fulfillment of something I’ve always known God was calling me to. Earlier, when I asked him about it, I felt he was always saying, ‘Yes, but not now.’ By giving me the privilege of teaching my own children, I knew God was going to use the things I was learning to help me teach children who did not have the opportunities that my children had...The work is fulfilling, not because I once thought I’d be ‘good’ at it...but because I beg God every day to help me finish the work he’s prepared me to do.” *Kingdom Calling*, p. 208

Margaret is doing great work for the Kingdom that God prepared for her to do. We are all blessed with capability and resources and skill that can and should be

used for God's kingdom and to his glory. Maybe not today, but God *is* preparing you to do great work.

So, today, "*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.*" (Col. 3:23-24)

If you are raising children, give it all you've got! If you are working, do your absolute best work. If you are not sure what is next for you, seek the Lord and ask him to help you to finish the work he's prepared for you to do. *He will.*

Your work is important to you, to your family, and to the world. It a major part of our abundant lives, both now and forever. Your work, whatever it is, matters to the Lord. Even if no one notices on this earth, he notices, and he will reward you. And never forget that you are not working for your own benefit; you are serving God and serving others through your work.