

We are in the third week of a sermon series that I have entitled “The practical gospel,” learning to put into practice what Paul said in *Philippians 2:12-13*, where he told the Philippians to “*work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*” Now that you have been saved, now that you have believed the gospel, work out the implications of the gospel into every area of your life as God works in you. Not “work for your salvation,” because we are saved by the grace of God and not by anything we have done, but rather “work out the implications of your salvation.” In other words, think through how the truths of the gospel should shape the different aspects of your life and allow the transformative power of the Holy Spirit to do His work.

The past two weeks, we have looked at the implications of the gospel for our love life and for parenting and family. This week, we will look at the implications of the gospel for work. **More specifically, the gospel and vocation**, because work implies what you do to make money. Vocation, from the Latin “Vocare,” to call, is not a Biblical word but a theological word, defined on dictionary.com as “a divine call to God's service or to the Christian life” or “a function or station in life to which one is called by God.” The word vocation communicates the idea that there is someone else who has called you to your station in life, whether it is as a student, a homemaker, an engineer, a teacher, a grandparent, or anything else. Once again, this sermon is not about “7 tips for being the best employee ever”; this is thinking out the implications of the gospel for every area of your life. If you want to go further, I highly recommend the book “*Every Good Endeavor: Connecting your work to God's work*” by Tim Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf. But for this morning, what difference does it make to your vocation that you believe the gospel?

The gospel summary statement I will be using this series is this: “**We are sinners who have been saved and justified by grace, learning to live as new creations according to God's will, trusting in a certain and glorious eternal hope and future.**”

If you read that statement closely, you will recognize that it has a past, present, and future dimension. Today, we are going to use those three aspects as our framework and examine what the implications of the gospel are for your work life, for your vocation?

We are sinners who have been saved and justified by grace.

1) Our self-worth does not depend upon our job, our performance, or our employment status

What we do to make money is often at the center of our identity. Think about how often the next question after “what is your name?” is “and what do you do for a living?” So many of us identify ourselves by what we do.

The problem with that, of course, is that when our identity is tied up with our job, then our self-worth rises and falls with whether or not we have a job, or what kind of job we have, or how we are being evaluated at our job.

But the gospel tells us that we are enough because God has declared us enough in Jesus, because He has declared us righteous, worthy, and this is not on the basis of what we have done or haven't done.

Ephesians 2:8-9 - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.

We are sinners means that we are separated from a holy God, so full of wickedness that we can not save ourselves by our own good deeds. But we have been saved and justified by grace. The second part means that God loves us so much that His Son, Jesus, died for us, to rescue us from our sins. We are justified, declared not guilty, perfect in the sight of God, not because of anything we did, but because of what Jesus did for us. There is no condemnation and nothing can separate us from the love of God.

And so whether or not we have a job or not, or what kind of job we have, it does not change our self-worth. In Jesus, we have an identity that does not depend upon our job or financial status. The more we rest in who God says we are in Christ, the more we find the freedom from judging ourselves on the basis of a job.

2) We can rest in God's sovereignty and approval, even when working

Some of you are old enough to remember the 1981 movie Chariots of Fire, a movie about two British track athletes – one Harold Abrahams, a Jewish man, and the other, Eric Liddell, a Christian, who compete in the 1924 Olympics. They each have a quote that reveals the difference between the one who has the deeper rest found in the gospel and the one who doesn't:

Harold Abrahams – *I will raise my eyes and look down that corridor; 4 feet wide, with 10 lonely seconds to justify my whole existence. But WILL I?*

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

See the differences? One running to justify his existence, to prove his life matters, so that even when he is at rest, he is weary. The other man, running because he knows who he is, always at rest in his soul, even when he is working.

What does this mean? This goes below what we do for a living to why we do what we do, and what our motivation is. If we know that the verdict is in about our self-worth, then even though we work hard, there is a deeper rest in our souls, because we know we are enough. We know we are loved. We know we matter. But if we don't know that, then we are in danger of working for the wrong reasons. Working to prove ourselves, or to gain a sense of worth, or to provide security for ourselves. There is a deeper rest found in the gospel:

Hebrews 4:9-11 - *There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰ for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. ¹¹ Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.*

Matthew 11:28-30 - *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

How does God give you rest from your toil? What is this deeper rest? It is the rest that comes from faith in Jesus, believing the gospel.

Hebrews 4:2-3 - *For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. ³ Now we who have believed enter that rest*

We heard the gospel and believed it by faith, and entered that rest. This does not necessarily mean we will not work as hard. But it does change our relationship to our work, as we no longer have to prove anything or justify our existence, since God's verdict is in.

We are learning to live as new creations according to God's will.

When we repent and come to faith in Jesus, God adopts us into His family and gives us His Holy Spirit. We have a new heart, a new spirit, a new hope, a new family, a new future. We have new desires. We are being renewed in our minds. We begin to learn how to live according to God's will, according to the values of the kingdom. What are the implications of this for our personal growth?

1) God has good works for us to do

Ephesians 2:10 - *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

This verse is often twisted to make it about your self-esteem, but it is really about purpose. God has saved you for a purpose. We are saved by grace, but we are saved for good works. We are not saved by our works, but our works do matter as part of being God's witness to our neighbors and our world. As Jesus put it:

Matthew 5:14-16 – *“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”*

Jesus has good works, a vocation, a calling, set aside for you, prepared in advance for you to do. That includes loving our spouse, raising our kids, serving our neighbor, doing your job well, and so on. We were created to do good works. **One thing I was struck by as I prepared this sermon was the realization that work was a part of creation.**

Genesis 1:28 - *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."*

It was the fall that turned work into toil:

Genesis 3:17-19 - *To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. ¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the*

field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

Because of the fall, what was once intended to be part of a purposeful, meaningful life has become a source of pain and frustration. But work was part of paradise. And more than that, work will be part of the new creation:

Revelation 22:5 - *There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.*

We will touch more on that later, but according to Revelation, apparently there is some sort of reigning with God that happens in the new creation.

The point is that work is not just a necessary evil in order to survive, something that we should get through as quickly as possible so that we can retire and travel and not have to work any more. God gives us vocations, and it is a significant part of being created in His image. We were meant to share in the responsibility of ruling and serving and caring for this world and the people in it. It is walking in that responsibility that gives purpose and meaning to life.

We know that God gives us gifts and talents to be used to glorify Him and serve others. Just as God equips Christians for building up the Body of Christ, so he also equips all people with talents and gifts for various kinds of work, for the purpose of building up the human community.

1 Corinthians 12:4-7 - *There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. ⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.*

Your gifts and talents are given by God but they belong to the community. They are not given so that you can say that you're talented; they are to be used for the common good. And these talents can take many forms. Jesus was a rabbi and a carpenter. Paul was a missionary and a tentmaker. There are many ways to serve others with the gifts God has given you.

As Tim Keller & Katherine Leary Alsdorf wrote, "The question regarding our choice of work is no longer, 'What will make me the most money and give me the most status?' The question must now be, 'How, with my existing abilities and

opportunities, can I be of greatest service to other people, knowing what I do of God's will and of human need?"

If we want to be like Christ, a life of self-serving leisure won't get us there. It is found in taking responsibility, in serving others, in doing our jobs to the glory of God.

As Bruce Waltke put it, "The very definition of righteous people is that they disadvantage themselves to advantage others, while the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves."

2) Work as if working for the Lord

Listen to Paul's words in *Colossians 3:23-24* - *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.*

This is a revolutionary way of approaching work and vocation. No matter who your boss is or what they are like, it does not matter. Work to please the Lord. Even if no one else deserves your best, He does. Work for Him. Don't have a great husband? Work at being a wife as unto the Lord. Struggling to love your kids or your parents? Work at loving them as unto the Lord. Dealing with a difficult boss, or coworker, or employee? Work as unto the Lord. Or, as Paul said elsewhere:

1 Corinthians 10:31 - *So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*

What would it look like for you to take this approach to your vocation?

We trust in a certain and glorious eternal hope and future.

We know that this life is not all that there is. We will live forever with God. Love will never end, death will be conquered. And all that our heart truly desires will one day be ours. We will spend eternity with God, in a place beyond comprehension. What does this mean for our vocation?

1) Trust that you will have perfect fulfillment in your vocation forever

The reality is that work is often fruitless and toilsome this side of heaven. You aren't always able to do what you want. Your sin gets in the way. Circumstances get in the way. We fall short of what we want to be or do. Our attitude becomes like that of the author of Ecclesiastes:

Ecclesiastes 2:17 - *So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*

And Paul tells us that because of this frustration, creation is groaning for that day when Christ returns and puts an end to sin and to the brokenness of this world:

Romans 8:18-23 - *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.* ¹⁹ *The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.* ²⁰ *For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope* ²¹ *that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.* ²² *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.* ²³ *Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.*

But on that day when we are with God, the curse will be broken and all will be made new. And we will reign with God over the new heavens and new earth. All the frustrations with our vocations here on earth will fade away as we find our perfect vocation with Him.

Revelation 22:5 - *There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.*

We will reign with him. Whatever we do here on earth, we will enjoy fulfillment in our labor forever.

2) Trust that everything you do for the Lord matters eternally

Because of the resurrection, it all matters. Nothing you do for the Lord is wasted.

1 Corinthians 15:58 - Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Because of the resurrection, everything you do for the Lord matters eternally. Along those lines, look at another really interesting passage in Revelation 21:

Revelation 21:22-26 - I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³ The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵ On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶ The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.

The glory and honor of each nation, the things that are good and beautiful and God-honoring, will survive, and the kings will bring their splendor into the New Jerusalem. There is some continuity between this world and the next. Even though the well-known refrain goes “you can’t take it with you,” it seems that in a very real way, you CAN take with you everything that has been done with Christ as the foundation. Everything that is of value will be resurrected in the new heavens and the new earth.

Bruce Milne – “Nothing of ultimate worth from the long history of the nations will be omitted from the heavenly community. Everything which authentically reflects the God of truth, all that is of abiding worth from within the national stories and the cultural inheritance of the world’s peoples, will find its place in the New Jerusalem.”

The best illustration of this truth is J.R.R. Tolkien’s short story *Leaf by Niggle*. Tolkien came to an impasse while working on his masterpiece *The Lord of the Rings*. He began to despair of ever completing the work of his life. And in the midst of that despair he wrote this story.

The story starts by introducing a little man called Niggle who had a long journey to make. The journey, as we will find out, is a metaphor for death. He was a painter, but wasn’t successful. Partly because he was too ambitious for his skill – he’d spend forever on a single leaf, trying to catch its shape, sheen and dewdrops glistening, but at the same time he wanted to paint a whole tree, birds, forest, and mountains. But he couldn’t finish it. There were always interruptions – he had to care for other people, like his neighbor Parish, who had a bad leg and was always

asking him to help with things. And sometimes he was just idle. But even when he was doing other things, he was thinking about his painting and what he hoped to accomplish.

The Inspector comes, because there was a flood, and they need canvas and wood to make houses, so he takes his canvas, and at that time the driver arrives to take him on his journey. He cries that his painting is not finished. A corner of his painting is eventually hung in a corner of a museum, with the painting called Leaf by Niggle, for a few years until the museum burns down and the painting is forgotten. But Niggle boards a train for the journey, and gets off the train in another country. And on the journey, this happens:

Niggle pushed open the gate, jumped on the bicycle, and went bowling downhill in the spring sunshine. Before long he found that the path on which he had started had disappeared, and the bicycle was rolling along over a marvelous turf. It was green and close; and yet he could see every blade distinctly. He seemed to remember having seen or dreamed of that sweep of grass somewhere or other. The curves of the land were familiar somehow. Yes: the ground was becoming level, as it should, and now, of course, it was beginning to rise again. A great green shadow came between him and the sun. Niggle looked up, and fell off his bicycle.

Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a Tree that was alive, its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide.

“It’s a gift!” he said. He was referring to his art, and also to the result; but he was using the word quite literally.

He went on looking at the Tree. All the leaves he had ever labored at were there, as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them; and there were others that had only budded in his mind, and many that might have budded, if only he had had time.

He goes on to see the birds, the Forest, the Mountains.

Tolkien was eventually able to finish *The Lord of the Rings*. If this is true, if there is some continuity between this life and the next, that, as Paul says, our labor in the Lord is not in vain, that the many things we never finish that were done for the Lord will follow us into the next life – there is something beautiful and right about

that. Trust that no matter how frustrating your vocation is on this side of eternity, on the other side, you will have perfect fulfillment in your vocation forever. And remember that God has given you good works to do. He has called you to the vocations you are in. Take up the responsibility He has for you, and give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because it all matters eternally.