

Take This Job And ...
Act Like God
August 28/29, 2010

I guess after a Johnny Paycheck song, a Homer Simpson moment and the Steven Slater story, we should probably pray. Would you join me?

Father in Heaven, I'm thankful that we can have fun in church. I'm thankful that while you are a very serious God, you are also a joyful, lighthearted God and that you created fun and music and laughter. And we've gotten to enjoy some of that this morning.

But, Lord, as I begin this message, I am aware that for a lot of people in this room, the issue of "work" isn't that funny and it's not a source of joy. For a lot of us in this room our jobs produce stress instead of lightheartedness. A lot of us dread getting up each day to go to work. So, God, I pray that You will use this message to lighten that load and to encourage us.

At the same time, God, there are others of us in this room who wish we *had* a job. Some of us are victims of the economic meltdown and we've been furloughed, downsized and let go. So, for me to talk about "work" in a message might feel like pouring salt in the wound. God, I pray that would not happen. I pray that You would use these words to bring comfort and healing and a sense of Your Presence, even in this time of struggle.

I know you want to do these things because You've already shown us how much You love and care for us through what Your Son, Jesus, did for us in his death, burial and resurrection. And it is in His name and for the sake of His Kingdom we pray. Amen.

While "take this job and shove it" might be the way a lot of people feel these days, I think a *more appropriate* motto for those of us who believe in Jesus and follow Him is "take this job ... and *act like God*." Take this job and act like God.

Before I tell you exactly what I mean by that, let me tell you what I do *not* mean.

- I'm not saying you should be arrogant: "in whatever work-situation you find yourself, just act like you're in charge of everyone and everything even though you may not be." I'm not saying "assume a godlike role" where you work.
- I'm also not saying "in whatever work situation you find yourself, be a godly person." You know, "act like Jesus would if he was the one putting in the time instead of you." That would obviously be a good thing to do, but that's not what I'm trying to communicate today.
- And I'm not saying "if your job is really, really hard and you're in a very difficult work environment, remember that Jesus also had a very, very hard task and his life was difficult and *he* made it, therefore, you can, too. Just act like Him." Actually, there *is* an element of truth to that – in fact, it'll be the subject of *next week's* message – but it's not what I'm talking about today.

What I'm trying to communicate by saying "take this job and *act like God*" is something much more basic and foundational. But, again, before I explain what I mean by it, I want to tell you *why* I'm telling you what I'm going to tell you.

I'm telling you what I'm going to tell you because I want to inspire you to look at your job *whatever* it is: painter or policeman; teacher or student; manager, owner, consultant, accountant, pastor, nurse, salesperson, coach or stay-at-home

parent, part-time or full-time ...

... I want to inspire you to look at your job *however* it is: low pay, high pay or no pay; working conditions that are good or not-so-good; assignments that are clear or not clear; leadership that's effective or ineffective; employees who are cooperative or uncooperative; whether you feel appreciated or not ...

... I want to inspire you to look at your job in a different light. I want you to have a vision for whatever you do that transcends paying the bills or providing for your kids or having enough money for retirement – as important as those things are. *I want you to have a vision that connects the work you do with God and his purposes.*

And that's a pretty radical concept because “work” is typically one of the *last* things that people connect with God. We connect church with God. We connect family and relationships with God. Sometimes we'll connect our ethics and our emotions to God. But when it comes to our work it's like there's an imaginary glass bubble around that area of our lives that says “this is the real world and all that God-stuff we talk about on Sunday doesn't really apply in here. That's because God belongs to the softer side of life and work is the harder side of life – where you have to produce or you're gone – and the two don't really mix.”

Have you ever thought something like that – that God really doesn't mesh with where you work or what you do?

Of course, many followers of Jesus who rightly understand that this can't be true because *all* of life – including work – is under God's domain ... many sincere Christians have attempted to break through that imaginary bubble by pointing out that, for most of us, “work” puts us side-by-side with people who don't know Christ ... which means that it's often the best opportunity we have to share our faith in some way or another. So, if you want to connect God with your work, the thinking goes, just be looking for ways to tell people about Jesus while you're on the job.

While telling people about Christ anywhere at anytime is definitely a good thing to do, the consequence of that way of thinking is that it shifts any connection between work and God *away from the work itself*. In other words, what you're actually doing with your time doesn't really matter to God as long as you share your faith while you're doing it.

Of course, if it's inappropriate or impossible to share your faith where you work ... or you work for a Christian ministry or a Christian-owned business where everyone is already a believer ... or you're not an extrovert ... or you're not a quick thinker, eventually *you can start to feel like a spiritual loser because you're missing out on “the primary opportunity you have.”* And work then becomes one more area of life where we beat ourselves down for not measuring up.

Have you ever experienced that? I have.

A Working Vision

Fortunately, however, it doesn't have to be that way. In fact, it *shouldn't* be that way because the Bible gives us a significant vision for work *in and of itself* – apart from any spiritual activity such as praying or sharing our faith.

Specifically, the Bible teaches us that the work of “the real world” is one of the most powerful and concrete ways that you and I can *be like God*.

Let me say that again: The work of “the real world” is one of the most powerful and concrete ways that you and I can be like God. It's one of the most spiritual things we can do.

And to help you see why that's true, I'm going to give you three biblically-based statements about God and work. And as I give you each statement and explain it, I'm going to add to it a phrase about us and our work which illustrates (I hope!) how we can “take this job (whatever it is) and act like God.”

Actually, let me go ahead and give you the three statements about God so you can see where we're going and then we'll unpack them.

1. God works.
2. God is not completely defined by his work.
3. God rested from his work.

... three things that we know from the scripture about God and work.

So let's look at the first one ... which is the main thing we need to understand if we're going to get this concept; the foundation upon which the other two rest ...

1. God works.

In fact, the very first sentence of the Bible shows God busily at *work* creating this world in which we live. Each day (whether literal or figurative) God is seen adding something to the creation through his *work* until, finally, the project is complete.

The Bible says, at that point ...

On the seventh day, God had finished his work of creation, so he rested from all his work.
Genesis 2:2 (NLT)

God worked in creating our world, but His work didn't stop, even though He rested.

John Chapter 5 tells us that the religious leadership in Jesus' day began persecuting Him because he was healing people on the Sabbath, which they believed was a violation of the command to *rest* on the Sabbath.

His response?

Jesus answered them, "My Father has been working until now, and I, too, am working." John 5:17 (NLT)

"God works," Jesus was saying, "and sometimes, when it's necessary, even on the Sabbath."

So what kind of work does God do? A quick survey of the Bible shows God at work as an architect, a builder, a teacher, a composer, performer, metalworker, garment-maker, potter, farmer, shepherd, tentmaker, judge, common laborer and a king.ⁱ (When you have all eternity, I guess you get good at lots of things!)

Paul Stevens, in his book *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective*, classifies the work that God does into four broad categories.

There is ...

- The work of *creating* where God forms, fabricates, maintains and finishes.
- The work of *love* where God does relational work, bringing dignity, health and meaningful life.
- The work of *salvation* where God does redemptive work, mending, uniting and saving.
- The work of *leadership* where God does community-building work and brings all things to their full completion.

Now, what's very interesting to me about this idea of God being a worker is that, in the world of the Ancient Near East from which the nation of Israel and the Old Testament came, this was a new and completely radical thought. No other

religion of that period – and there were many – could even comprehend such a thing as a God, or gods, working.

That’s why the Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote:

Since the world began no ear has heard and no eye has seen a God like you who works for those who wait for him!
Isaiah 64:4 (NLT)

For example, when you read the creation stories of the Egyptians and the Babylonians, powerful nations that had a direct influence on the people of Israel for many years, you don’t see their gods *working*. Instead, in *their* stories, the gods shove the work off on a lower class of gods who then revolt and create human beings to do the heavy lifting in the world! ⁱⁱ *Gods don’t work; people do.*

In fact, the message of the other religions of the Ancient Near East was that part of work people were expected to do was to physically make their gods, carry them around wherever they went, and take care of them. But, the God of the Bible made it very clear to Israel that he was not like any of those gods.

Speaking again through the prophet Isaiah, God says ...

“I have cared for you since you were born. Yes, I carried you before you were born ... I made you, and I will care for you. I will carry you along and save you.”
Isaiah 46:3-4 (NLT)

“I do the heavy lifting,” God was saying. “Not you. I work.”

God is a worker. God works. That’s the first statement and the most important concept we need to get in our minds for everything else that follows.

Now, let’s add the phrase that connects that to you and me and our work, whatever it is.

God works, *therefore*, as those created to reflect Him, it is to our glory and God’s that we work, *too*.

Like Father like son; like Creator like creature. We are designed to reflect who God is and what he does and part of the way we do that is through work. It’s to our glory and God’s glory that we work. Have you ever thought of work like that? It’s to your glory and God’s that you work in some way.

Here’s why:

Again, page one of the Bible says ...

God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

But look what comes next:

Then God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it.” Genesis 1:27-28 (NLT)

Before there is a word in the scripture about community or even communion with God, God issues a mandate that covers all of humanity: “In the same way that I am a creator, God is saying, you, too, are meant to be creators. Bring what I have begun in this Earth to full fruition.”

Now, someone might read that and say, Yeah, well, that’s talking about having babies and filling the earth with people!

That's part of it. But so is work. Before Eve is ever on the scene to help Adam fulfill the procreation implications of that mandate, *Adam is given a job!*

*The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.
Genesis 2:15 (NIV)*

Adam's job is to tend the garden: to take the raw materials God put there and, *through work*, make the garden even better. And that's really the intention of work, in general.

Michael Kruse, one of my favorite writers, has a very vivid way of illustrating this concept.

He writes

We have a mandate to “work” the created order into a higher vision. We are to be about converting matter, energy, and information from less useful states (kind of like the raw form of the garden) to more useful states ... from lesser configurations to higher configurations ..., where “useful” and “higher” are thoroughly shaped by *shalom* [the kind of peace-filled communion with God and community with one another that God desires].ⁱⁱⁱ

See, just as God by *working* took what was “empty and without form” (in the words of Genesis 1) and turned it to something functional and more complete, that's what humans, as those made in His image, are also designed to do.

And that's why “work” is one of the most powerful and concrete ways that you and I can be like God and one of the most spiritual things we can do.

Of course, at this point, someone might say, “OK, but how does this apply to people who have been laid off, or people who are disabled and can't have a job, or to people who don't have a job but spend many hours volunteering? What about people who are retired and past their working years?”

Well, the answer is that it doesn't apply ... *if* you limit the idea of work only to what you get paid for. But the kind of work God calls all of us to is more than just employment.

Paul Stevens writes:

Every legitimate human occupation (paid or unpaid) is some dimension of God's own work: making, designing, doing chores, beautifying, organizing, helping, bringing dignity, and leading.^{iv}

A lot of people just miss that. They decide that because they are not employed, they aren't really working. Or, worse, that they don't *need* to be working in some way. They get discouraged.

But if we don't work in some way; if we don't figure out some intentional and regular way of converting things “from lesser states to higher states” that somehow contributes to the world beyond ourselves, we're violating one of the most fundamental callings of a human being and we're headed down the road to unhappiness. *That's how fundamental work is to the design of human beings.*

In fact, work is so fundamental to our design that life in “Kingdom Come” – when Jesus comes back and renews, restores and regenerates all things – life in that world (or, I should say, “life in *this* world remade”) *includes work!*

Contrary to what you may have heard there's no eternal retirement plan for the People of God. We're not going to be floating around on clouds strumming harps *because to be fully human is to be a co-creator with God.* To be fully human is

to work. And that will not end when Jesus returns, just as communion with God and community with one another also will not end. It's what we were made for.

Of course, I should also add that when the curse of sin is removed in the New Creation, the struggle and strife of work will also be removed. And work will be what God intended it to be when He first commissioned humans to be his partners in developing all things. And *that*, friends, will be awesome!

“God works; therefore, as those created in his image, it is to our glory and his that we work, too.” That's the first statement of a vision that connects work to God and his purposes.

Here's the second.

2. God works, but he is not completely *defined* by his work. (i.e. "God is not his job.")

God is also defined by relationships within the Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit that make up the Being we call God. And God is defined by relationships with individual human beings, like you and me, as well as his relationship with the collective people of God made up by those human beings. God is also defined by his many character attributes that transcend His work: his love, his mercy, his grace, his justice, his anger, his humor and so on.

God is defined by *many* things; his work is *just one* of those things.

In fact, let's look at that scripture from Genesis Two one more time; this time with a slightly different emphasis:

*On the seventh day God had finished his work of creation, so he rested from all his work.
Genesis 2:2 (NLT)*

One commentator writes that “this seventh day is an important sign that God is not defined by what he does. *He does not always have to be accomplishing something.* God's creation work was very good (He said so Himself!) but, by resting, God's work was put in its proper place.”^v

Now, let's add a phrase that connects the idea that “God is not his job” to you and me and our work.

As those created to reflect God, it is to our glory and God's as well that we, too, *do not become our work*

...

... that we, like God, put our work in its proper place.

I talked a bit about this last week; how, recently, God showed me that I believed – falsely – that I *am* my job. God showed me that I wrongly had it in my head that I was tied to the mast of the good-ship NHCC. And that's why whenever things were good at church (as I defined “good”), then I was good. And, whenever things weren't so good, then I wasn't so good. And, you can ask Jetta all about that, she'll tell you.

But I want to expand on that just a bit today. Being emotionally “tied to the mast” of your job (whatever it may be) is only one danger of allowing your identity to become too closely associated with your work. There are several others. Let me give you three very quickly.

1. It produces a drivenness and a compulsion to get ahead at all costs. If I am my work, then I must succeed no matter what or I am a failure. I am a loser.

2. If something happens to my ability to work or if for some reason I lose my job – even if it was no fault of my own – it produces an internal devastation from which it can take years to recover. We’ve all seen people to whom that’s happened.
3. Allowing our identity to become too closely associated with our work eventually diverts our attention from other areas of life that are just as important: our relationships with family, friends, God; our health; who and what we’re becoming internally.

And those kinds of results are most definitely *not* to our glory or to God’s.

Of course, a great question at this point might be: how do we keep from becoming defined by our jobs? I mean, the world in which we live is very demanding. And it’s very easy to get sucked into thinking that, more or less, we really *are* what we do.

One way to keep that from happening is simply replacing what the world says with the truth of what God says. Right thinking about this issue goes a long way. And, we’re going to spend a lot of time this fall talking about right thinking.

Another way is to make a conscious choice to focus on the other aspects of what defines us: our relationships, our character, who we are simply as those who are dearly loved by God and saved by his grace – things that have nothing whatsoever to do with work.

But it takes more than just right thinking and focusing on other ways of defining ourselves. And that’s where the third statement about God and work comes in. Remember the third statement?

3. God rested from his work ...

So, we have God works ... God is not completely defined by his work ... and God rested from his work ... which, again, comes directly from Genesis Two.

*On the seventh day God had finished his work of creation, so he rested from all his work.
Genesis 2:2 (NLT)*

Have you ever wondered: what did God do on that seventh day instead of working? I have no idea. I was just thinking about this - maybe Father, Son and Spirit went on a picnic. Nah, just kidding.

All we know for sure is what God did *not* do: *work*. God did whatever would be truly restful and rejuvenating to an omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, tripartite Divine Being. And by doing *that* – whatever *that* is - God made a very strong statement that He is not defined by his work.

And the same principle will work for us as well ... which is why we’re going to add this phrase to the statement ...

God rested from His work, therefore, as those created in his image, it is to our glory and God’s that we rest from our work, as well.

In fact, this is so important that God made it a specific commandment to the nation of Israel and it appears several times in the Old Testament books of Law. But what’s interesting is the motivation *behind* God’s commandment to cease from working for one day out of the week.

When God gives Moses the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai, the reason He says to take a whole day off and not work –

no emails, no texts, no phone calls, no grinding to-do lists – the reason God said to do that is “I live this way and you should, too. I worked six days when I made the whole world and I took one off, and you should, too.” The command is based in the fact that humans are designed as reflections of God.

But when Moses repeats this command again in Deuteronomy 5, the reason changes. This time God tells the People of God they should rest weekly not because of what He did in creation, but because of the life that they *used to live* before He freed them and brought them to the Promised Land.

Through Moses, God said:

Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. Deuteronomy 5:15 (NIV)

It’s as if God was saying to them, “Remember that for hundreds of years, you and your parents and their parents and their parents were slaves to your jobs. You lived in a culture (in Egypt) which defined you according to what you could do. You *were* your job.

But I rescued you from that. And, every week I want you to take a day completely away from work and remind yourself how much better your life is because of what I have done for you. I want you to remember that I am a God who values you for who you are, not what you do.” It’s called grace.

And I think that, for some of us, this simple observance of a Sabbath Day – a day without an agenda, a day to just be, would go a long, long way to freeing us from the “tied to the mast” syndrome. And it would also help us to be who we are meant to be as reflectors of God.

I’ll have more to say about this Sabbath idea later this fall, but let’s go ahead and wrap up this message today.

Closing

At the beginning of this message I said that *I want you to have a vision that connects the work you do with God and his purposes*. And, I hope this message has helped you in that in some way.

Actually, what I hope is that next time you go to work (or do something work-like, if you don’t currently have a job) I hope you will think “Look at me ... I’m acting like God!” Again, not in an arrogant way, but a sense of the glory you are bringing to Him as well as a sense of the glory you are bringing to yourself because you are doing what He put you here to do.

And I hope you will remember that you are not your job and that you will build the habit of ceasing from work into your life and that, again, as you do, you will have that sense of glory about you.

To help solidify this, as we close today, I want us to do something symbolic that connects our work – whatever it is – to God. (And I’m going to ask the band to come get into place to help us with this).

When you came in the room, you should have received a blank 3x5 card in your program. Could you please take it out right now? And, you’ll need something to write with. Here’s what I want you to do with it:

1. If you have a job – if you have some kind of work that you are involved in on a regular basis – I want you to take a moment and write it down on the card. School teacher, stay-at-home mom or dad, law enforcement officer, pastor, volunteer ... whatever.

2. If you currently don't have a job – I want you to write down what it is you would be doing if you *were* employed or what you could be doing, even if you're not employed, as a way of advancing life outside of yourself.

It's a little bit different assignment, but everybody should be able to write down something like, "Here's the kind of work I'm doing, or could be doing, or want to be doing." Just write that down on the card.

Now, in just a minute, the band is going to begin playing. At that point, if you feel comfortable doing so, I'd like for you to get up from your seat and place your card in one of the baskets that are set around the room. It's kind of a symbolic way of bringing this part of our lives to God; saying that we trust him; saying that we want our work to be a way that we reflect who he is and thereby bring glory to him and to ourselves.

Then, once we've all had a chance to do that, we're going to stand together and sing a worship song that I think is pretty appropriate for this topic. And when that's over, I'm going to say a prayer of blessing over the cards, really over you all because the cards represent you. And then we'll be done.

So, band, go ahead and give us some music. And whenever you are ready, you can move to one of the baskets. Here we go.

Prayer of Blessing

The Bible says that ...

God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it." Genesis 1:27-28 (NLT)

And so I say to you:

May your labors be fruitful ...

... bringing prosperity and wholeness to you and to others.

May your efforts be multiplied ...

... going far beyond what you can do in your own strength.

May your abilities increase ...

... so you fill completely the task to which God has called you.

May your influence be wise and loving ...

... reflecting the wisdom and love of the God who made you to reflect His glory in the work you do.

And now to the God who is able to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, I ask that these words become reality for everyone represented by these cards. And I ask it in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, who blesses us with everything we need for life and for godliness. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ http://krusekronicle.typepad.com/kruse_kronicle/2007/03/the_other_six_d_7.html

ⁱⁱ See Gerhard Lofink, Does God Need the Church, pg 8

ⁱⁱⁱ Note that in my brackets, Kruse uses the work "shalom."

http://krusekronicle.typepad.com/kruse_kronicle/2008/08/prosperity-the-mission-of-god.html

^{iv} Pg 119 from http://krusekronicle.typepad.com/kruse_kronicle/2007/03/the_other_six_d_8.html

^v <http://www.ifeseurope.org/resources/graduates/key-topics/work/opposite-work.html>