

Sermon for Sunday, September 6, 2009

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WHOM DO YOU WORK FOR?

Luke 19:11027

We spend roughly a third of our lives working. Some of us spend even more time than that. And in these economic times, many more of us aren't spending nearly as much time working as we would like to. But that simply highlights the fact that we have a tendency to think of our work as what we do to make a living. Work is what we do for pay. Our hobbies, our passions, our families, our dreams, our aspirations, those are the things for which we receive little or no economic reward at all, and our tendency is to think of these things as what we do *when we are not busy making a living*.

But that is not the Bible's conception of work. And this parable has a lot to teach us not only about the nature of our work, but the nature of the one for whom we work. So we're going to see three things this morning with regard to our work. First, we see that we are given a trust; second we see that we are called to respond; and third we see that we are promised a destiny. First,

1. We're given a trust – In order to properly understand what this parable teaches us, we need to remember where we are in the story. The first section of Luke tells of Jesus' ministry in Galilee where he grew up. There he begins teaching about the kingdom of God, performing miracles, and gaining a following. Then there is a long section in the middle as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem. The last section of Luke is the account of his crucifixion and resurrection, and it takes place mostly in Jerusalem. So at this point in the story, Jesus is in Jericho, about 17 miles from Jerusalem. He's on the last leg of his journey. The story is reaching its climax, and that's why verse 11 tells us that he was near to Jerusalem, and that the people were expecting the kingdom of God to appear at any moment.

In many ways, this is a parable about expectations. We already know the story. We know that Jesus ended up nailed to a cross. But the people standing around him that day in Jericho were expecting something far different. When they heard Jesus say that salvation had come, that he had come to seek and to save the lost, they heard political deliverance. They heard military revolution. They heard Braveheart. They expected Jesus to march into Jerusalem and yell, "Freedom!" and stomp all over the nasty Roman oppressors.

And so Jesus told this parable to challenge their expectations. It's not about what the people expect from their king. It's about what the King expects from his people.

And so he begins to tell the parable. "A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return. So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. 'Put this money to work,' he said, 'until I come back.' Notice that the nobleman leaves his kingdom to go have himself appointed king. He doesn't go *to* his kingdom. He *leaves* it in the care of his servants. He gives them a trust. He says, "Take care of this until I return."

In the first two chapters of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, God creates the heavens and the earth, and everything in them. Last of all he creates human beings, and puts them in the Garden of Eden, as Genesis 2:15 says, "to work it and keep it." There are two things we need to understand here. The first is God is a profoundly and joyfully creative being. He takes joy in what he makes, as we can see in Genesis 1. Every time he makes something new, he says, "Good. This is good."

The second thing is we are created in God's image. In Genesis chapter 1, we're told that God created man in his image, male and female, and told them to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth and have dominion over it. And a big part of what it means to be created in God's image is expressed in the work he gives us to do.

And what did God give Adam to do? He gave him a garden to cultivate. In essence, God says to each one of us, "I'm giving you resources. They are my resources, and I want you to manage them for me. Mess with them. Have fun with them. Make them grow and flourish. Be creative."

We were created to make things. And the fact that we are often frustrated in our ability to do what we *really* want to do only shows just how deep a yearning that is in our lives. As human beings, we have core yearnings. We yearn for God, for relationship. We yearn for beauty. And we yearn for *significance*. We were created to make a difference, and unless we experience fulfillment in the work of our hands, that yearning will be thwarted in our lives.

The true and proper direction of that significance, the object, or goal of it, is always the glory of God and the wellbeing of others. God made the earth as a place of flourishing and wellbeing for us, in order that he would be glorified through us as we reflect his image. Do you see that? God made the world for his glory and our wellbeing. That means that significance is a relational concept. The yearning in our lives to make a difference in the world of necessity involves other people. That is why Dorothy Sayers defined work as the "expression of creative energy in the service of society." Our work, our significance, should always be God-centered and other centered, and our greatest joy comes, not when we are serving ourselves, but when we are serving others, when we are taking the material resources at our disposal and cultivating them for the glory of God and the benefit of others.

Sayers was a famous contemporary of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. She was a playwright and scholar and in her marvelous little book, *Creed Or Chaos?* she talks about the Biblical doctrine of work. She quotes a surgeon who talked about how people's concept of work in WWII was changed because they were no longer serving themselves but others. The surgeon said this: "What is happening is that nobody works for the sake of getting the thing done. The result of the work is a by-product; the *aim* of the work is to make money to do something else. Doctors practice medicine, not primarily to relieve suffering, but to make a living – the cure of the patient is something that happens on the way. Lawyers accept briefs, not because they have a passion for justice, but because the law is the profession which enables them to live. The reason why men often find themselves happy and satisfied in the army is that for the first time in their lives they find themselves doing something, not for the sake of the pay, which is miserable, but for the sake of getting the thing done."

Do you see how that transforms our culture's concept of work? Instead of making money in order to serve ourselves, work is whatever we are doing to manage the resources at our disposal for the glory of God and the wellbeing of others. It is other-centered, not self-centered. And that is completely opposed to our culture's idea of the purpose of work. In our culture, it's all about getting ahead. So you have to go to the right school and get the right grades in order to get the right degree. But it has to be from the right college if you want to get the right job and the right salary in order to feel that your life is worth anything. But the Bible says, "No. Work is the expression of creative energy for the service of others."

That means that a stay-at-home mom is doing work every bit as meaningful, if not more so, than the financier or the doctor or the lawyer. I read a blog posted by a lady who was responding to this concept, and she said that that totally transforms her notion of what it means to raise her kids. Instead of biding her time with her children, she is infused with a real challenge to train them in life and Godliness.

But this also transforms the church's concept of work. It means that ministry, being a preacher or working for the church, is not the only valid means of doing God's work. It's *all* God's work. Both the preacher and the plumber, if they are striving to bring glory to God and serve others, both are doing God's work. All kinds of work have the potential to bring glory to God and wellbeing to others. And whatever work God has given you to do is a trust. He has given you resources and asked you to cultivate them for his glory and the wellbeing of others. So first, we see that we are given a trust. Second, we see that

2. We're called to respond Now everything we've just been saying may sound all well and good, but many of you are probably thinking to yourselves, what planet are *you* living on? Hello, earth to preacher! I have to put food on my table and clothes on my kids' backs. Forget about getting ahead. I'm just trying to get by! Or there are many of us who don't have any work at all right now.

All of this is due to the fact that our work is cursed. Work itself is not the curse, as we saw from Genesis 2:15. In their sinless state, Adam and Eve were called to work the ground and keep it. Work was creative and enjoyable. But when Adam and Eve sinned by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God cursed their work by introducing the economic aspect. He said, "because you have eaten of the tree, cursed is the ground because of you, in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth, and by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread". Instead of being creative and enjoyable, work became economic and burdensome. Something we have to do just to feed ourselves and get by.

Do you see how this is a punishment fit the crime? Adam and Eve's sin was that they wanted to be their own gods. They wanted to find their own significance apart from God. They refused to rely on *his* resources, and wanted to rely instead on their own. They expressed that by eating from the tree, and so God said, "Ok, you want to eat your own food? You want to be your own gods and rely on your own resources? Then everything you eat will come by the sweat of your face. You will seek to find your joy and significance in yourself, but you will find only thorns and thistles."

So here's the deal. This parable is aimed not so much at the specific circumstances of our lives and our work. It's aimed at our response to them. Jesus called each one of his servants to respond by giving an account of how they had used his resources. And that was the measure of their faithfulness to him. Notice that neither of the first two took any credit for what they had gained. They both said, "Lord, *your* mina has earned this much more." They recognized that they were simply managing a trust, and that the trust belonged to the king. The emphasis is not on the resources but on the response of the servants. We know that because in this parable each servant receives the same amount, and it's a very small amount with limited buying power. It's not about our resources, it's about our response.

Do you see that? God is asking us to be faithful in the small things, in the least of things, even in thorny, thistly things. Do you have thorns in your life? The way we respond to these things is a reflection of our response to God. Our response to our work is conditioned by our response to the king. Now all of our work is going to be a combination of creative, enjoyable things, and thorny, thistly things. It's just a consequence of living and working in a fallen world.

For example: I washed windows for a year while I was finishing seminary. I can tell you, washing windows was not, in and of itself, truly enjoyable work. There were definitely some thorns in that work for me. But it was not all thorns. I did get a certain amount of satisfaction out of finishing a job and seeing a whole house with clean windows. But oftentimes it meant getting down on my knees in the dirt to accomplish it. Or there was a certain pleasure in approaching a second story window and trying to figure out, "Ok, which ladder am I going to use, and how am I going to get to that corner over there?" But after lifting ladders all day, my aging back was not too happy. And I also really enjoyed the other

seminarians I was working with. We had a rapport and a camaraderie with each other. That was probably the most enjoyable aspect of the job. I met some great guys. But sometimes we got on each other's nerves. That's just the way it is. There are fun, enjoyable things. And there are thorny, thisty things.

Our response to these things reveals for whom we are really working. We are either working for God, or we're working for ourselves. We are either chasing God's kingdom, or we're chasing our own little kingdoms. You see that in the different responses the servants give in this parable. The first two servants saw everything they had, even the thorns, as a trust, as a gift, because they saw God as a kind and gracious king.

But what about the last servant? He wrapped up the mina in a handkerchief and refused to put it to use. And we need to assume that he was doing *something* while the king was gone, right? I mean, if he wasn't using the king's resources, whose was he using? His own! In effect, he was saying, "I don't want your resources. I don't want to serve you, and I don't want to serve others. I want to serve myself."

If your view of God is as a harsh taskmaster, then you are going to be bitter when you encounter thorns and thistles in your work, when things don't go your way. You are going to be like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. You'll say to God, "Look, I've been slaving for you all these years. Now you owe me! I'm keeping all the rules. Why don't you bless me?" But that just shows that you are not serving God. You're using him. You don't want God. You just want his stuff. You don't want the father, you just want the inheritance.

Which leads us to our last point. Because this is not the end of the story. Not only are we given a trust and called to respond, but

3. We're promised a destiny What this means, and what this parable shows us, is that our response to the king determines the destiny of our souls. Notice that the faithful servants are given even greater responsibilities when the king returns. One is given charge over ten cities and the other over five. Everything they've been doing up until then are merely a trial, simply an apprenticeship. It's like the difference between an acorn and a whole forest full of trees. Our work now is just a taste of what we'll do in heaven. It's like the aperitif before the main entrée.

That doesn't mean we will all be financiers or city managers. That would be to press the details of the parable farther than they are meant to go. The point is that our work will continue in heaven. And it won't just continue. When Jesus returns to claim his kingdom here on earth, then the real work will begin. In Genesis, everything starts with a garden. But by the end of the story, in the last two chapters of the Bible, the garden has become a city. A beautiful, life-giving, flourishing, thriving and joyful place. And a place where we will continue to find work to do. That's when the real story begins.

What about the last servant? What happened to him? All the parable tells us is that his mina was taken from him and given to the one who had ten. We are not told whether he is allowed to remain in the kingdom with the other servants, or whether he is killed along with the enemies of the king. One of the main objectives of Jesus' parables was to encourage his hearers to find themselves in the story, to identify with one or another character. So I'll leave it to you to find yourself in this parable. With whom do you identify in this story?

But that still leaves us with the problem of verse 27, where Jesus says "bring my enemies and kill them in front of me". It's a brutal, graphic, and disturbing verse. And it's meant to be. Jesus was not one to mince words, and he was certainly not one to avoid using striking language to make a point. What he says here is even more striking when we realize that the Greek word used here for "kill" actually means to slaughter, or hew into pieces. So what are we going to do with that?

Remember at the beginning we said this is a parable is about expectations. Well, there are enemies in this parable, but they're not the ones we expect. The enemies are not the Romans, or the outsiders, or immoral people, or any people group at all. The enemy is our own heart. And Jesus uses dire language because the situation is dire indeed.

The destinies we reap are simply the consummation of the hearts we cultivate toward God. In assigning our eternal destinies, God simply deals with us according to the disposition of our hearts toward him. No one says it any better than C.S. Lewis, who writes this:

“People often think of Christianity as a kind of bargain in which God says, ‘If you keep a lot of rules I’ll reward you, and if you don’t I’ll do the other thing.’ I do not think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.”

You are, at every moment of your life, turning yourself either into a citizen of heaven, or a denizen of hell. And it all comes down to your response to the gospel, your response to the gift. Because ultimately, that’s what the mina is. It’s a gift. It’s the grace of God. Mere religion gives us a taskmaster God; a God who says obey the rules or I will send you to hell. But the gospel gives us a loving, gracious God: a God who uses every resource at his command for our wellbeing.

Where do we see that? Verse 11 tells us: “He was near Jerusalem.” Jesus’ destiny looms at the beginning of this parable. The climax of his life’s work was just over the horizon. He was about to use every single resource at his command, not for his own benefit, but for yours. This king went to Jerusalem not to slaughter his enemies, but to be slaughtered by them, and for them.

Ultimately, our response to God, to our work, and the destinies we reap are the fruit of our response to the gospel. It’s a seemingly small, insignificant thing. Jesus often compared it to a seed, or a grain of wheat, or a tiny amount of leaven. In the world’s eyes, it has limited buying power or none at all. But in reality it has the power to transform our hearts, and renew the world. Because in the gospel we see Jesus on the cross, we see the king of the universe using every last resource at his disposal, infinite love, infinite power, infinite justice, infinite wisdom, infinite holiness, infinite resources, we see him using them all for us, cultivating them, leveraging them in order to save us, heal us, renew us, and bless us. And when you see that, it will transform your view of God from a harsh taskmaster to a loving, gracious king. It will transform the way you look at the thorns in your life. Jesus was no stranger to thorns. He wore a crown of thorns so he could bless us with a crown of life and plenitude and joy. Will you give your life and your work to this king? For he has given you the infinite resources of his kingdom and his love. Let us pray.