

**THEOLOGY OF WORK No. 4**  
**“The Bible’s Double Perspective”**  
**April 23, 2006**

**Review**

We have spent so far three Sunday evenings summarizing the Bible’s theology of work, or, better, introducing that theology. Remember, we are talking about work in the sense of one’s occupation, the sense in which it is used, for example in Psalm 104:23: “Then man goes out to his work, to his labor until evening.” We said, according to Scripture, work is holy, all kinds of work, all manner of occupations, and that in doing one’s work as unto the Lord one is serving him. We noted that this understanding of a Christian’s vocation has often been lost to the Christian mind, especially as a result of the creation of a dichotomy between the spiritual realm and the secular realm. It has often been thought that “spiritual” work is holy – the work of ministers, monks, and nuns, or the spiritual work of laymen that they perform in their spare time (church work, evangelism, private devotions, etc.) – but ordinary occupations belong to the secular sphere in which work has no spiritual meaning or special Christian importance. That is: one does spiritual work to serve the Lord; one does secular work to eat. The Reformation rejected that dichotomy and in Reformed Protestantism in particular the argument was made that work – work like Adam’s as a farmer and the Lord’s as a carpenter – is also to be service to God.

We also said that in the economy of God, in his providence, our work is one of the primary instruments by which God bestows his blessing upon our lives. As Luther put it, “Work is holy; the hidden mask behind which God gives us what we need.” Further, God prepares us for particular kinds of work and, by various means, calls us to particular occupations and vocations.

Tonight I want to take the next step and consider the Bible’s double perspective on work, one very positive, the other quite negative. This double perspective appears even in the various terms the Scripture employs for human work or labor. The ordinary terms for work and labor, in both Hebrew and Greek, have the same neutral connotation of the English word “work” [מְלָאכָה, ἐργον, ἐργασία, ἐργον]. But both languages have terms that are used in Holy Scripture that correspond more closely to the English word “toil” and imply that work is wearying, troublesome, and unfulfilling [עָמַל, κόπος]. [W.S. Reid, “Work,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1188] Those latter terms can mean “work” but also “trouble,” “sorrow,” and “hardship.” We find the Hebrew word עָמַל, `amal, in a statement like this one from Ecclesiastes 1:3:

“What does man gain from all his *labor* at which he toils under the sun?”

Now, we have those two perspectives on work, as we have already seen, given to us at the very beginning, in Genesis 2 and 3. Labor is man’s calling and the means of the fulfillment of his purpose in life. It is God’s calling and man’s reason for being. All of that in Genesis 2. But it is also a sphere of man’s life that particularly bears the divine curse on account of the fall, a point made emphatically in Genesis 3. The fulfilling and satisfying work of Genesis 2 has become the laborious, frustrating, difficult, and unsatisfying work of Genesis 3.

“Cursed in the ground because of you; through *painful toil* you will eat of it all the days of your life.” [Gen. 3:17]

And we find that double perspective on work running right through the Bible. But perhaps in no part of Holy Scripture is it brought together in such a striking and helpful way as in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Before looking at its teaching regarding work, let me just remind you of the nature of the argument in this often misunderstood book of the Bible. It does not teach, as has often been supposed, that because there is no meaning in anything else – pleasure, wealth, learning, or power – one must finally come, as the author himself did, to find one’s hope in God. It is not a sermon devoted to the futile search for happiness and meaning without God. That is a true message and a biblical one, but it does not happen to be the teaching of the book of Ecclesiastes.

When the preacher, both at the beginning and the end of the book and often in between, says “Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!” he doesn’t mean that life is *actually meaningless* or even that at one time he came to the conclusion that life was meaningless. What he means is that you cannot find out its meaning; you cannot discover what God is doing in the world; you cannot even discover what God is doing in your own life. There is a mystery about God’s ways, a surprising and inexplicable opaqueness to divine providence. God does not act in the ways we might have expected; many things in this world do not turn out as we think they would or should. God’s ways are not our ways. The Bible, of course, teaches us this fact in many ways and in many places, but it is the special theme of Ecclesiastes. The author does not leave us in the dark about this. He states his theme and repeats it a number of times.

“I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” [3:10-11]

“So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can see what will happen after him?” [3:22]

“When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore a man cannot discover anything about his future.” [7:14]

“‘Look,’ says the Teacher, ‘this is what I have discovered: Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things – while I was still searching but not finding...’ [7:27]

“When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man’s labor on earth – his eyes not seeing sleep day or night – then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.” [8:16-17]

“As you do not know the path of the wind or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things.” [11:5]

Why is one man rich and another poor? Why does hard work leave one man still poor while a lazy man inherits wealth? Why is one sick and another well; why does one die young and another live a long life? Why are the good persecuted and why do the evil often enjoy great success? And on and on the questions go.

But this inability to explain what God does and why does not lead this man to doubt the Lord, his sovereignty, his goodness, or his justice. All through the book God is confessed by this man as good and wise. This man trusts in God even though he cannot explain God’s ways.

The preacher’s message is thus this: consider the world you live in. Take off your rose-colored glasses and look at the real world. Time passes according to the cycles of nature over which we have no control; death comes to everyone sooner or later and its coming bears no evident relationship to a man’s being good or bad, a believer or an unbeliever. Good men and bad men die alike; sometimes the good die young and the bad live to a ripe old age. Evil men often prosper and righteous men suffer. The harder you try to make sense of this the more inscrutable it all becomes. You become tempted to think that life is as aimless as it often appears to be. So it seems “under the sun,” a phrase that occurs frequently in the book and which reminds us of how little we understand, how little sense we can make of the world if we limit our perspective to the temporal and visible (“under the sun”).

So what are we to do? Well, says the preacher, you are to know your place and accept it. Fear God and keep his commandments. Remember the coming judgment. Live in the present and enjoy it thoroughly for it is God’s gift to you. This is your moment; live it to the full. But, remember, you are only a human being! Much is beyond you and must remain so. There will be many puzzles, many dark shadows, many times in which it will be necessary to trust God in defiance of appearances. But you can do that because God is good and just and will do right. It is much more important that we understand that and believe that, than that we understand what he is doing at the moment or why he ordered events as he did. We see very little; he sees everything. All will be perfectly resolved at the end. It is enough for us to know that.

It is in the context of that larger message that we find in Ecclesiastes a two-fold perspective on our daily work.

*I. First, there is a strong witness borne to the weariness and futility of work.*

“What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?” [1:3]

“Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.” [2:11]

“So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun is grievous to me...I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun.... So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it.... What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest.” [2:17-23]

My favorite illustration on that particular point – of having to leave behind the accumulation of one’s working life for another – is a story Jack Hudson, late of the PCA foundation once told me. It concerned a financial planner who was visiting a woman recently a widow. As she greeted him at the door he noticed a gigantic diamond on her finger and several times found himself glancing at it during their conversation. She noticed and asked if he would like to hear the story of how she came to have that ring. He said he would, very much. Well, as it happens her husband was a skin-flint, a real miser, a grouch in whom there was no spirit of generosity. When he found out that he was dying he came to his wife and said to her, “Down on my workbench is a coffee can with \$50,000 in it. When I’m dead, buy me a really expensive casket; I want my friends to see me going out in style. Then put the rest of it into the stone.” What someone else does with your money after you’re gone may not be what you intended or hoped for! But we are not done yet with the negative comments about work in Ecclesiastes.

“And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man’s envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless...” [4:4] Is that not true? So much of the economic activity of human life is driven by low motives. Adam Smith had that right!

“Naked a man comes from his mother’s womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing away from his labor that he can carry in his hand. As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind?” [5:15-16]

And no one can dispute the truth of this. There are exceptions, of course, but for most of mankind and for all of mankind some of the time, even for the best human beings, work creates emptiness, frustration, and pain. It all must come to an end [walk through your house and consider who is going to get what; think of your job that someone else will occupy and how soon you will be forgotten]; so much is imperfect, incomplete, unedifying, and unsatisfying [how much didn’t turn out the way you had hoped; how often you didn’t achieve what you had wanted to achieve; in many cases hard work produced a failure not a success; you are let go even after being a faithful employee; others advance beyond you in income, prestige, and authority and you can’t understand why; the student doesn’t get it no matter how hard you work at teaching him; you cultivate a customer with care but lose the sale]; so much of work is drudgery [there is so much you must do that you don’t particularly enjoy doing; for every class lecture there are grades to compute; for every important conversation with your children there is laundry to get done; for every new idea that might brighten your company’s prospects there are conversations with employees that must be let go; or problems with the company’s books that must be sorted out; for every day a new building takes shape there is a day of biting cold rain making it

miserable to be outside]; the more one succeeds the more he has to lose, the more he becomes the target of competitors, the more subject to criticism; and on and on it goes. Come on; admit it. You don't wake up every morning unable to contain your excitement that you get to go to work again that day. Perhaps sometimes you feel that way, but not always; not by a long shot.

That is work and a working life in this world and there is no denying it.

*II. But, second, in Ecclesiastes there is an equally strong witness borne to the fulfillment and satisfaction of work.*

“I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor.” [2:10]

“A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God.” [2:24-26]

“So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot.” [3:22]

“Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him – for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work – this is a gift of God.” [5:18-20]

“So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of his life God has given him under the sun.” [8:15]

“Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life under the sun – all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.” [9:9-10]

Here work is satisfying, fulfilling – both for itself and for what it brings us – and an important part of human happiness. He is doing something useful; he is accomplishing something and feeling a sense of accomplishment; he is using his gifts and talents; he is seeing the fruit of his labors. It is good and adds its goodness to his life in many ways. I find my work very interesting and, in many ways, very satisfying. I like some parts of it better than others, but as a whole I love my job. And I know that many of you feel the same way. You don't find it a trial to go to work, to undertake your occupation. You are glad for the work you have to do and you find fulfillment in doing it. It gives a sense of purpose and meaning to your life and a field in which to express yourself in important ways. It is a sphere of achievement and of success. I know it is so for many of you. And may we not say that this is wonderful, God's gift to us?

Put these two perspectives together and you have a doctrine of work drawn both from the creation and the fall and a view of work that is both realistic and affirming at the same time. It invites Christians to accept and face the more painful realities of our working life – not to imagine that we can avoid these – but at the same time to accept that we are right to find fulfillment, satisfaction, and pleasure in our work. God made us for that and gave that to us and even the fall cannot take this from us.

But this double perspective also means that while work should be for us an opportunity for fulfillment and satisfaction, it can never be, we must never let it be, the secret of our lives, the center of their meaning, or our salvation. Work will not unlock the mystery of life and it will not entitle us to the world to come.

As it happens, that is an extraordinarily important conclusion and conviction to be trumpeted in our day. Today work is worshipped and is trusted and is believed in in a way that is quite remarkable. Whether it is the feminist woman who looks to work to validate her existence or the man who finds work the place, the sphere of, his real success in life, people are looking to work for things it is incapable of providing.

Materialism encourages this worship of work for if possessions are the meaning of life then work is the way in which to acquire the meaning of life. Feminism, as I said, has made a god out of work, by making a career outside the home the measure of a woman's liberty and importance. And men have often succumbed to the same temptation, learning to see work as the chief means to what is really important in life: power, pleasure, and recognition. One reason there are so many people who not only work 16 hour days and eat, drink and sleep their work but who admire themselves and others for doing so is because work has become a god and gods must be worshipped. What is a god but someone or something we look to for the fulfillment of our lives? But work is like any other idol. When we lean our weight upon it, it proves a broken reed that will pierce us rather than hold us up. This is a message for all Christians to learn well to that they can then teach it to a world tottering on the brink, if not already falling over the edge, of learning this lesson in the hardest and the most bitterly disappointing way.

Here is Paul Vitz writing as far back as 1977 in his book *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* [131-133].

The failure of careerism is...coming. Indeed the first large-scale "career" crisis can be predicted with some certainty. Those in the middle of the post-war baby boom are now in their mid-twenties, the peak time for career expectations. This group represents a generational wave which by its very size has had and will continue to have a profound impact on American life, it is this group, reared on selfist psychology, which is especially committed to the career as the ultimate source of fulfillment. In part, these narrowly focused hopes are simply the result of the disappearance of other higher ideals. The universities, centers of selfist values, have also encouraged careerism for the pragmatic reason that they desperately need enrolments to stay in business.

We may sketch briefly the reasons why this group of people is headed for a career crisis of tragic intensity:

- (1) Their expectations of success are unrealistically high, far higher than those of most generations.
  - (2) Economic growth in the United States has slowed considerably, and it is unlikely to come close to matching that of the last thirty years. Any major economic trouble in the next fifteen years would only make matters that much worse.
  - (3) Career dissatisfaction regularly strikes people in their late thirties or early forties. For the group we are talking about, this is only about ten years off.
  - (4) Many of today's popular careers, such as teaching, psychology, medicine, and law, are already overcrowded or becoming so. Future success in these fields will be severely limited.
  - (5) A very high proportion of today's career opportunities are in large organizations or bureaucracies. Such cumbersome systems invariably limit opportunities for advancement and destroy chances for effective, gratifying action.
  - (6) Many of today's young careerists will have no family to provide an alternative source of meaning and emotional support. The divorce and separation rate is very high among the generation of rising careerists; even ties with parents, aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters are often weak.
  - (7) Many have chosen careers because it is the thing to do — not because of any deep interest in the activity involved.
  - (8) Finally, and most important, careers are intrinsically too weak an ideal to carry the huge psychic burden they are now given. Even many in that small group who do succeed find success unsatisfying, even bleak and empty.
- Together all these factors predict that this large wave is headed for a smash some time in the next decade.

And so it happened and continues to happen. So many features of the modern working landscape have made work much more a matter of insecurity than security for modern men and women. Corporate “downsizing” and “dejobbing” are terms that have entered our vocabulary since Vitz wrote his book. Dejobbing, by the way, refers to the end of the single-company career, what is referred to in a *Time* article as “the end of work as marriage.”

“Formerly a curriculum vitae with thirty years of service with one firm was an asset, a sign of loyalty and dependability; now it is seen as a liability. (Does this person have initiative and creativity?). Adaptability has become one of the most important qualities for survival in the workplace.” [R.P. Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, 107]

We are talking about *survival* in the workplace now, much more often than we are talking about fulfillment. In other words, just as marriage has begun to crumble in our culture as a center of happiness and meaning for people, so now has work which was to take marriage's place. As a god work leaves its worshippers in a state of insecurity and delivers much less than its devotees had hoped.

This should not surprise Christians. They know work's dark side. The Bible has presented it to us plainly and often enough. But we never intended to trust ourselves to our jobs for the meaning and purpose of life. A job is too small a thing to trust our hearts and lives to. But, trusting God, we can enjoy the good side of work to the fullest, find real satisfaction there, as in our marriage, our family, our church life, even as we accept that, so long as we live in this fallen

world, we must await the day when all is as it should be. We must bear the bad while we enjoy the good, looking as we do to the perfect that is to come.