



SESSION 1 — A Theology of Work - Pastor Keith -

Frank Churchill and Larry Morey teamed together in 1937 to write what would become a well-known and oft-referenced song for the Disney film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. That song was “Whistle While You Work,” and 79 years later, it continues to have a broad recognition.

“Whistle While You Work”—it’s a nice sentiment, but rarely a reality! Not only are most of us too socially mature to engage in such an inane workplace behavior, but oftentimes the workplace robs us of the emotional energy to even consider such a response. Yes, indeed, the “thistle” has replaced the “whistle” in the workplace of humanity, just as Genesis 3:18 forewarned.

During the first part of the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, no safety devices were used, and 23 men fell to their deaths. For the last part of the project, however, a large net which cost \$100,000 was installed. At least 10 men fell into it and were saved. But an interesting side note is the fact that 25 percent more work was accomplished when the men were assured of their safety via this net.

Danger and insecurities are found in every workplace, and they often cause us to give less than our best, to become frustrated or disillusioned, to question our purpose, to worry about financial stability, and the fearful possibilities go on and on. The goal of this first session will be to give a comprehensive (not exhaustive) biblical understanding of work, in order that we might install a safety net beneath you as you consider and engage in your work. You don’t need to doubt, question, fear, or loathe work, for in the grand scheme of things, it has been invested by God with great significance.

We’ll essentially go cover to cover in our Bibles to consider a biblical theology of work—as created by God, as broken by man, and as renewed by Jesus.

WORK AS CREATED BY GOD

1. God is a working God (Psalm 92:5; 111:2; John 5:17; Revelation 15:3).
 - Creation (Genesis 1:31-2:3)
 - *His work is creative and obvious [lots of works].*
 - Psalm 104:24 — “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.”
 - Psalm 8:3 — “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place.” God’s works (which are described diminutively as the work of His “fingers”) led the psalmist to marvel.
 - Isaiah 45:9; 64:8 — God’s creation work is like a potter with clay. “Indeed, a wide range of trades and crafts continues to shape the imagery of God’s work in Scripture—e.g., refining, threshing, building, forestry, irrigation, and bleaching” (“Labor, Work, Toil” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*).
 - Furthermore, the “hand” or “arm” of God is frequently referenced to highlight the working nature of God).
 - *His work is detailed and magnificent.*
 - Psalm 139:13-16 — “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”

- Psalm 19:1 — “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
- Psalm 92:4-5 — “For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy. How great are your works, O Lord!”

- Providence

- Ephesians 1:11 — God “works all things according to the counsel of his will.”
- Daniel 4:35, 37 — “All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’ ... Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just.” Cf. Habakkuk 1:5

- Recreation/salvation

- Ephesians 2:10 — “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”
- Philippians 2:13 — “It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”
- John 19:30 — “When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished,’ and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” Cf. Isaiah 26:12 and Ephesians 2:8-9

2. God designed man to work.

- He dignified humanity with work (*Genesis 1:26-28*).
 - Genesis 1:26 NET — “Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness, so they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move on the earth.”

- “Following the cohortative (‘let us make’), the prefixed verb form with *vav* (ו) conjunctive indicates purpose/result (see Gen 19:20; 34:23; 2 Sam 3:21). God’s purpose in giving humankind his image is that they might rule the created order on behalf of the heavenly king and his royal court. So the divine image, however it is defined, gives humankind the capacity and/or authority to rule over creation” (*NET Bible*, note #50 in Genesis 1:26).

- God invested humans with His image, so that they would have dominion over the earth and subdue it under them, being coworkers with and under Him.

- He positioned humanity for work (*Genesis 1:28; 2:15-25*).

- God placed man in his work. — He could now “work and keep” the Garden (2:15) and “subdue and have dominion” over the animals (1:28; 2:18-20).
- God provided for man in his work (2:16-18, 21-25). — He provided for him physically, spiritually, and socially.

- He normalized humanity in work (*Psalms 104:19-23 [cf. Proverbs 6:6-11—even the ants work]*).

- He eternalizes humanity in work (*Isaiah 2:4; 65:21-23*).

3. God cares about our work (*Isaiah 28:23-29*).

WORK AS BROKEN BY MAN

1. After the Fall, work became cursed by sin (*Genesis 3:17-19*).

- What was a blessing became a burden. A new Hebrew word for work is introduced—“toil” (*Genesis 3:17—ESV, “pain”*).
- The Preacher of Ecclesiastes fleshes out the nature of that “toil” in Ecclesiastes 2:18-23.
 - *Material earnings are passing* (vv. 19-21). — They are left behind (v. 18) to the one who is untested (vv. 18-19) and untitled (vv. 18, 19, 21).

- *Mental earnings are punishing (vv. 22-23). — Work can produce unmet longings and aspirations, frustration and anxiety, physical suffering, and great amounts of stress, “day” and “night.”*

2. After the Fall, work became an occasion for sin.

- *Idolatry (Exodus 20:3; 34:17; Psalm 127:2; Isaiah 2:8; Luke 10:38-42)*
- *Pride (Genesis 11:1-9)*
- *Exploitation/oppression (Ecclesiastes 4:1-3; 5:8)*
- *Rivalry/envy/competition (Ecclesiastes 4:4)*

WORK AS RENEWED BY CHRIST

2 Corinthians 5:17 — When Christ becomes our Savior and Lord, even our work begins to change, for after all, we are His “workmanship” (Ephesians 2:10)! What we broke, He is fixing!

- Genesis 1-2 — God creates mankind ... in His image ... for good work.
- Ephesians 2:10 — Jesus recreates mankind ... into His image (cf. Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10; Romans 12:2) ... for good work.

We can trace Jesus’ renewal of work in the following ways.

1. Jesus engaged in work.

- After 400 years of silence, God again “visited” earth in order to accomplish a specific and spectacular “work.”
- *On one level, Jesus engaged in “9-5” occupational work (Mark 6:3; so also His followers—Acts 18:3; 20:33-35; 1 Corinthians 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9). Furthermore, He often used illustrations from the workplace in His teaching—~85% of His parables are from the business and commerce world, because of His audience.*

- *On another level, Jesus thought of His entire life in terms of a “work” that He had been sent to do (John 4:34; 5:36; 9:3-5; 17:4).*
- *Application: This is a great model for us — we both engage in “9-5” occupational work and have been sent to participate in a greater “work” (John 9:4; 20:21).*

2. Jesus commands work.

- *We should work, not steal (Ephesians 4:28).*
- *We should work, not be a burden (1 Thessalonians 4:9-12; 1 Timothy 5:13; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9, 11-12).*
- *If we don’t work, we shouldn’t eat (2 Thessalonians 3:6-10—cf. the opposite in Luke 10:7).*
- *If we don’t work, we shouldn’t fellowship (2 Thessalonians 3:11-15).*

3. Jesus instructs our work (Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1).

- *He instructs our orientation in our work.*
 - We are His workers (1 Corinthians 14:1-2).
 - We work as “unto the Lord” (notice the phrases in Ephesians 6:5-8 and Colossians 3:22-24).
 - Work must not be our idol (i.e., Sabbath; Deuteronomy 5:12-15).
- *He instructs the goals for our work.*
 - To glorify God — worship: to give the right opinion of Him by how you work (creativity, excellence, diligence, distinction, etc.) and to accomplish His purpose in your work (e.g., we can work to help the oppressed, steward this planet, promote morality, teach truth, etc.) (Colossians 3:17; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Ecclesiastes 9:10 ... the Genesis 1:26-28 “dominion mandate”)

- To share the gospel — witness: show (Matthew 5:16; Titus 2; Daniel 1 ... good work can eliminate distractions from and provide proofs for the gospel) and share (Matthew 9:37-38; 28:19-20; Acts 1:8 and 8:1, 4 ... we must use words) the message of the gospel to those with whom you work
 - [NOT To contribute to human flourishing for the advancement of God's Kingdom (although this might be a wonderful byproduct since work can be a means of "loving our neighbor as ourselves") — (1) It fails to discern the real problem, which is sin, not a poor economy, working conditions, interpersonal relationships, inefficient pay scale, etc.. (2) It fails to recognize that any pragmatic worldview and socioeconomic ethic can produce a good worker that contributes meaningfully to his/her workplace. (3) It fails to honor the gospel by seeing the need for the worker to be absolutely transformed in all ways to his very core, in order that work may once again be worship. (4) It fails to understand the nature of the kingdom—spiritual now in human hearts, physical later during the millennium; focused on people who recognize the King.]
 - *He instructs our attitudes in our work* — We should work with:
 - *Skillfulness* (Proverbs 22:29; 31:13-27)
 - *Diligence* (Proverbs 6:6-11; 10:4-5; 14:23; 18:9; Ecclesiastes 4:5; 9:10; 10:18) — Illustration: Consider this humorous, but somewhat true-to-life memo: "To all employees: Due to increased competition and a desire to stay in business, we find it necessary to institute a new policy. We are asking that somewhere between starting and quitting time, and without infringing too much on the time usually devoted to Lunch Periods, Coffee Breaks, Rest Periods, Story Telling, Ticket Selling, Vacation Planning and the rehashing of yesterday's TV programs, each employee endeavor to find some time that can be set aside and known as the 'Work Break.' Whereas this innovation may seem radical to some, we honestly believe the idea has great possibilities, can conceivably be an aid to steady employment, and might ensure regular pay checks. While the adoption of the 'Work Break' is not compulsory, it is hoped that each employee will give the plan a fair trial. Those not in favor of the idea will, we hope, have completed plans for extended vacations!"
 - *Integrity* (Ephesians 6:5-7; Colossians 3:22-23)
 - *Excellence* (Titus 2:7-8; 3:8; 1 Peter 2:12, 15)
 - *Faith* (Ephesians 6:8; Colossians 3:24; Philippians 4:11-13)
- These attitudes help accomplish our goals of worshipping and witnessing (e.g., Joseph, Daniel; 1 Peter 2:9-12)!
- *He instructs the responsibilities of our work.* — There are many different occupations, but God gives specific requirements for both employees (Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-25) and employers (Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1). Cf. <http://bit.ly/1lAxx2f>
 - *He instructs our enablement for our work.* — Only with God's blessing on it can our work be productive (Psalm 127:1-2; 107:35-38; examples: Joseph, Daniel...God "was with them").
 - *He instructs the income from our work.*
 - Getting paid (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15; Daniel 1 suggests that as a general rule, good employees will get paid by their bosses in evidence of God's care over them)
 - Not getting paid (Colossians 3:24-25)
 - Using our money — needs (1 Timothy 5:8), saving (Proverbs 13:11; 21:5, 20; 6:6-8), debt (Proverbs 22:7; Romans 13:8) Cf. singlefocusindy.org/financial-stewardship
 - Giving back to the Lord (1 Corinthians 16:2)
 - Being generous with what we earn (Ephesians 4:28; Acts 20:35).
 - *He instructs our rest from our work* (Mark 6:30-32; Ecclesiastes 4:6-8).
 - *He instructs our satisfaction from our work.* — Meaningful earnings from work are providential (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26; 3:13): God gives fulfillment to the righteous (vv. 24-26a), but futility to the wicked (v. 26b).
- Clearly, then, Jesus is interested in our work!

4. Jesus fixes our work (Isaiah 65:21-23).

5. Jesus wants our work.

- *Christian service is called “work” (1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:11; Hebrews 6:10; “good works” Ephesians 2:10).*
- *Christians are called “God’s fellow workers” (1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Timothy 2:15; cf. Romans 16:6, 9, 12). We are, after all, His stewards (cf. Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27; 1 Corinthians 4:*
- *Christians are encouraged to always abound in “the work of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58).*
- *Christians are promised an eventual rest from their work. — Rest is coming, but it is not now (Hebrews 4:9-10). A weekly Sabbath was meant to foreshadow the eternal Sabbath (cf. Revelation 14:13).*
- *Are you working for the Lord? (Revelation 2:2)*
 - *In your employment, are you working for the Lord? [as unto the Lord and as the Lord’s worker]*
 - *Outside your employment, are you working for the Lord? [as His ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:18-20) to complete His work (Colossians 1:24-29)]*
- *Illustration: At No. 10 Downing Street, London, early one morning, a timid knock called William Gladstone (the early-1800s British Politian who served four times as Prime Minister) from the writing of an important speech he was to deliver that day in Parliament. Standing at the door was a boy. Mr. Gladstone had won the friendship and confidence of the boy by little deeds of kindness. The boy said, “Mr. Gladstone, my brother is dying. Won’t you please come and show him the way to heaven?” Leaving his own important work for the most important work any Christian can do, Gladstone soon arrived at the bedside of the dying boy. In a matter of moments, the little fellow was rejoicing in his newly-found Savior! Returning to his office, Gladstone wrote at the bottom of the speech he was preparing, “I am the happiest man in London, England, today!”*

(Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* [Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996], 1320.)

- *Illustration: Jeremy works with diligence and excellence in his DNA sequencing lab in order to help cancer patients get the organ transplants they need. And yet, he has often reflected, “If I help extend an individual’s life for 20-, 30-, or 40- more years, but lose them for eternity, what have I actually accomplished?”*

CONCLUSION

Dear Lord, As I pray to you now my mind is full of my work. Its pleasures and pains, its stresses and rewards are burned into my brain. Quiet my soul for these few moments and hear my prayer as one of your workers in the world.

*My work is hard, Lord. I need Your counsel and comfort:
when things fall apart,
when I'm confronted with evil,
when my co-workers' needs are too great,
when I'm tired to the insides of my brain,
when work is not appreciated.*

*My work is necessary, Lord. I need Your gifts and Spirit:
when things are developing well,
when I'm making positive changes,
when society is made better because of what I do,
when I'm working efficiently and effectively,
when I'm honored as a valuable worker.*

*Every day of my work:
I want to remember that You are my God,
I need to know that You're there with me,
I count on Your blessings for my successes,
I want to thank You for the chance to work in this place,
I need courage and conviction to see myself as Your worker.*

For Your gifts and Your grace that come to me as a worker, I praise Your name and thank You for being my God. Amen. (<http://bit.ly/UE3LcC>)

RESOURCES

Pastor Keith, *Ecclesiastes: Two Ways To Live* study series, Lesson 4 “The Futility of Life, Part 4: The Frustrations of Labor” (Ecclesiastes 2:18-26, www.singlefocusindy.org/ecclesiastes).

Pastor Keith, *Colossians: The Supremacy and Sufficiency of Christ*, Lesson 13 “All Wrapped Up in Jesus, Part 5: Our Employment” (Colossians 3:22-4:1), www.singlefocusindy.org/colossians.