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Blue Collar God: Dirty Jobs

Genesis 1:26-31; 2:15

In March the college sports world was shaken when a ruling was handed down saying that football players at Northwestern University had the right to unionize. Really? College athletes can strike? It got me thinking, what would happen if mothers decided to unionize! Collective bargaining, reasonable work hours, fair pay, time off... Kids, you'd be in big trouble! Dads... you'd be in bigger trouble!

A month from tomorrow, Cooper, our last child, will graduate from high school and be off to work at Camp Spalding. Next fall, it is Whitworth for him. Cyndi's job description will change radically. And as I think back over our last 21 years of child-rearing... and as I think back to all that my mom did for me growing up, I have to say, I don't think there is a harder job in the world than being a mom. Truly. Thank God for great moms who keep crazy hours for no pay, sleepless nights, little recognition and stretch marks as their badge of honor. Thank you for your hard work.

That's what we are talking about in this sermon series: work! We spend fifty-seven percent of our waking hours of our working years on the job... 57%. That is a huge chunk of life. So how should we understand our work? Our starting point last week was to ask the question, "What does God think about work?" And when we turn to the earliest pages of the Bible, we make a remarkable discovery: our God is a working God! A blue collar God. The first chapters of Genesis find God hard at work creating the cosmos... planting a garden, getting his hands dirty, creating a man.

The gods of other world religions considered work demeaning but not the God of Abraham and Moses. Yahweh delighted in his labors, and when he was done he couldn't help bragging. He looked at his work and said, "That is very good!" Last Monday I helped a friend lay flooring in his house. When we stood up at the end of the day—backs and knees sore—and surveyed the whole thing, guess what I said? "That is very good!" I learned that from our blue collar God!

So, when we talk about work, that is our starting point. Our God—the God of the universe—is a blue collar God. But so what? That's fine for Him, but isn't our work different... the result of the curse? Adam and Eve disobeyed God and part of their punishment was, they had to work, right? Listen to God's scathing words after the fall:

¹⁷To 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. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. 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."

Sounds pretty clear, doesn't it? Work is a part of the curse. Everything was fine until Adam and Eve disobeyed God... just another day in paradise. But after the fall, part of their punishment was work! And they passed that curse on to us. Work is our curse for being sinful human beings, right?

Sixty years ago a singer named Tennessee Ernie Ford released a song about a hard-working coal miner, trapped in his life. Any of you remember it?

You load sixteen tons and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt
Saint Peter don't you call me cuz' I can't go! I owe my soul to the company store!

A lot of people view work this way. Perhaps you are one of them. Your job is a curse; a necessary evil. You owe your soul to the company store. You are getting older and deeper in debt and you have to claw out a living. It's miserable, but what are you going to do? You gotta put beans on the table. It's just part of the curse of human existence. Isn't that what the Bible teaches?

Well, no, actually. Turn back to Genesis 2: Let's pick up where we left off last week.

⁴This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens... ⁷the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. ⁸Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ...¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Did you see the word in verse 15? "Work!" Wait a second! This is before the fall! This is before Adam and Eve blow it, eat the forbidden fruit, and get kicked out of the garden. Everything is still perfect: a newly-created world, a newly-created man, a newly-created garden filled with fruit trees... this is paradise. And it is into this paradise that God places his new man with an assignment: to work! Work wasn't punishment after the fall. Work was part of Paradise. Work is part of God's perfect creation.

But why should this surprise us? We've already discovered that God is a working God, right? If work is good for God, why wouldn't we expect it to be good for us? Especially when you read, ²⁶Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

Did you see that? Let us make man "In our image, in our likeness..." This is unique in the creation account. Nothing else is said to be created in God's image. Only man is crafted by God's hands, only man is brought to life by God's Spirit, and only man is created (male and female) in God's image.

What does it mean that we, that you, are created in the image of God? Well that is a huge topic. But one of the things it means to be created in God's image is this: we work! Remember, we have just been introduced to the hard-working God who created the cosmos, not because he had to but because he wanted to... because it delighted Him. And when he created man, the first thing he did was put him a beautiful garden—not to lounge around and eat bon bons, not to watch the Serpents and Angels fight it out on the big screen, but to work—because, the being created in the image of our working God is also going to be a worker.

We were created to work. Work is a blessed part of paradise, not the fall. Work was intended by God to delight us and define us and fulfill us. Work can be holy because when we work, we are living into the image of God. Work gives us life, but why is work so important? Because, when we discover how God has created us—when we discover our passions and our gifts and what makes us tick—and then labor in that arena, it gives us a sense of purpose and worth.

There are limits, of course. We have plenty of stories of workaholic dads who ignore their wives and neglect their children. But it is not too much to say that work is intended by God to be a blessing in our life, and it is one of the significant ways He shapes us into the person He wants us to be, uses us to serve the world he created, and makes our life meaningful and fulfilling. And our work, done right, is also one of the most important ways we can worship God. Have you ever thought about that? Your work is worship! Not just what you do here, Sunday morning for one hour, but those other 40 and 50 and 60 hours a week—or if you are a mom the other 167 hours a week—are also acts of worship where you are seen by the world as an image of Almighty God!

If this is true—if work really is part of the blessedness of creation and not a punishment or a necessary evil—then it explains a lot. It explains, for instance, the pain of unemployment. For men, particularly, this strikes at a deep place in our identity. One friend who has been looking for work for more than a year shared that it makes him feel frustrated and bitter. He has watched the life he built crumble... selling off possessions, spending down savings, receiving rejection

letters. Friday he wept over his sense of failure and shame. He was himself homeless three times as a child. He remembers sleeping on a cot in a motorcycle shop for a year. He is terrified that he will lead his own family into homelessness and destitution. Can you hear that it is not just about making a living for that man? There is a deeper issue of worth and purpose.

Our need for work also explains how empty a life of leisure can be. A man in our church switched companies a year ago. He had a non-compete clause with his old company that lasted a year. So for a year, he was paid to sit at home and do anything he wanted to do. Sounds like a dream, right? It nearly drove him crazy. (Apparently, it nearly drove his wife crazy, too!) He was so excited to get back to work and be productive again.

This also flies in the face of our retirement myth. Put in 45 hard years and, finally, retire to a life of ease... but that turns out to be empty. One person told me, "My Grandpa withered up when he retired." I talked to another newly-retired man who is now hard at work, growing his family foundation. Not for himself; he doesn't need any more money. He wants to give a bunch of money away to worthy causes. (I was delighted to learn that Chapel Hill is one of those causes!) I said, "So you figured out that a life of golf and travel isn't very fulfilling?" He said, "I have a ton of friends just like that. They retire... all they do is play and they are miserable." Just yesterday, another retired friend said, "I never call it retirement. I call it a new chapter. I'm working as hard as I ever did on things I love... and having a ball." Why? Because, we were created to work.

Work matters. It fulfills us. It inspires us. It makes us feel productive and worthwhile. It delights us—not always, of course, every job has problems and frustrations, but on the whole—when you survey the long trajectory of your work life God intends that you be able to look at what you are doing and say, "That is very good."

But what if you can't? What if you don't think your work is good? We will dive more deeply into this in the coming weeks, but if on the whole you do not find your work life-giving, you may need to make a change. One of four changes, maybe. You may need to change your rhythm, change your lifestyle, change your job or change your attitude.

If your work is not life-giving on the whole, you may need to change your rhythm. What is the ratio of work to rest in the Bible? Six to one. God worked six days... and then He rested from his work. Not because God was exhausted but because He wanted to pause to enjoy what He had done, and because He wanted to model for us the rhythm of a healthy life. We can work hard for six days, but if we do not take a Sabbath—if we do not break from our work—it will wear us down and affect our relationship with God, with our family and with others. It is said that you can do seven days' work in six days, but you cannot do seven days' work in seven

days. If you do not have a 6/1 rhythm to your work life, it will destroy you, not delight you. So change your rhythm. Observe a Sabbath!

Or you may need to change your lifestyle. If you have a house that is too much for you, two car loans, student loans... if you are swimming in a pool of credit card debt and working just to stay ahead of the next minimum payment... that will kill your soul. If you are working a job you don't like, for a paycheck you need to survive one more month... you may need to change your lifestyle. Horrifying, I know... especially in Gig Harbor where everyone is looking at where you live, what kind of car you drive, what kind of car your teenagers drive. But here's a radical idea: live more modestly, buy a smaller house, drive a used car, get out of debt, save a little money. And if you don't know how, the next time we offer Financial Peace University, take the class. It might change your life.

Or maybe you may need to change jobs. I have a friend who left a well-paying job that bored him to tears to take a job that fills him up, even though it pays \$20,000 less. If you are not working a job that allows you to develop and enjoy the passions and gifts God has placed in you, it won't matter how much money you make. You will be miserable; stop grouching about it. Maybe you need to have the courage to get some training, go to night school, take a cut in salary and start doing something that fills your soul.

Finally, maybe need to change your attitude. How many of you read my daughter Rachel's musings in the e-bulletin this week entitled "Life Lessons from the Bar Cart?" In it she speaks of what she has learned—this newly-minted theology graduate from Whitworth—working as the only white collar among a group of blue collar workers at a local country club, waiting tables and driving a bar cart around the golf course. She has learned a lot, actually, including the importance of attitude. One young woman named Sarah—a 27 year-old, tattooed, chain-smoking single mom since she was 14—is one of Rachel's favorites. Rachel overheard a dishwasher asking Sarah how her day was going. "She responded, 'Every day is what you make of it. I never have a bad day, because I always choose to make it a good one.'"

Sarah is not a Christian and yet she has chosen an attitude that, frankly, puts some of us whiny believers to shame, doesn't it? If every day you go into the office you are complaining to yourself and others about your work, what do you expect that will do to your heart? What if, instead, you were to ask the Lord to give you a new heart for your workplace, to give you a love for your fellow workers, to give you empathy for your grouchy boss, and to give you a passion to perform your duties with excellence as if you were doing it for the Lord? Because, in fact, that is exactly what you are doing.

You were created to work! Just imagine, when you work well you are exhibiting the image of Almighty God! And like everything, we cannot live this way without the help of the Spirit. So each Sunday for the rest of this series, we are going to

close the service by praying for you. That God might be glorified in your work... and that you might experience the delight of working well. Today, I want to pray for moms.

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. What does it mean to be created in the image of God?
 2. Were you surprised to discover that work is "a part of paradise?" How is that true for you? How not?
 3. As you have reflected on the Sunday-Monday divide, what is God saying to you about the holiness of your work?