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Blue Collar God: Working Draft

Genesis 1:26-28, 31; 2:15

I tell you what; there is a ridiculous irony in trying to prepare a sermon on work on the eve of a long-awaited birthday trip to the beaches of Florida. And there I was on a sunny afternoon, the suitcase half-packed behind me, doing word studies on the Hebrew words for work in Genesis... all so that we could come to the question of, "What is work?" Well, don't worry, I found the answer... on the beach.

No, really... we explored what is work. I talked with my dad, a pilot, and shared with him that we are talking about how God cares about the work that he does. And you know what? My dad lit up and told me about all the behind the scenes stuff he does in his job with FedEx. It was a breakthrough for him to realize that God also cares— even more than he does— about just how efficient he can be by maximizing gas consumption and load time. It was the first time I'd gotten to hear so much detail about how his job as a captain contributes to his company's mission statement. All because I opened the conversation that I think God cares about the detail of his work.

My whole family talked about their work—2 pilots, a lawyer, a bookkeeper, a store manager, an IT director, a stay at home mom, and a 90 year old grandma... all at different places as it regards their faith, and all engaged in this question of "What is work?"—because we opened the conversation saying that God cares about your work.

The Bible has a lot to say about what work is. What did we say the first week? God works, and if God works, then... we work. We have already established that we are unique as Christians because we worship a God who works. We worship a God who created us in his own image. So because our God works, we work. God cares deeply about your work. He has actually commissioned you to work! So what exactly is work? We're going to tackle today.

Let's see how this is in the heart of Scripture—that work is fundamentally part of who we are as human beings. It's part of our identity. So work is not just what you do when you make money. Work entails many things you will not ever get paid for. Work is not limited to your "job." You're not off the hook from this work discussion if you're retired. And you're not excluded from it if you are disabled, unemployed, or too young to "work." So let me give you the working draft of our definition for work up front. And we're going to explore the first half today.

Work is doing something with what God gives you so that the world thrives and Jesus is glorified. Work is *doing something* with what God gives you so that the world thrives and Jesus is glorified. We've modified that definition from Tim Keller's *Every Good Endeavor*, but its principles come right out of the pages of this ancient book... which is God's revealed truth to us.

Let's go back to Genesis 1:26... to our first command from God as it regards what the something is we are supposed to do with what he has given us. That's where we'll define work. Listen for what God commands us to do as it regards creation. What does it mean to do something with what God gives us? Hear the word of the LORD.

*"Then 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 and over the livestock, over all the earth and over all the creatures that move along the ground."*

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

*God **blessed them** and said to them, (now listen for the commands to work here) "**Be fruitful and increase in number (or multiply); fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over** (or have **dominion** over) the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." ³¹"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."*

This is the word of the LORD.

Genesis 1:28 tells us that our work is first as general as the rest of creation: be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. These are all in a command form, but they're the outworking of the blessing of God. Do you see that in Genesis 1:28? "God blessed them, saying"—God's blessing is his command to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth. It's the exact same wording in Genesis 1:22 when God says of the animals, "God blessed them, saying, be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth."

God could have done a fine job filling up the earth all on his own, but it is the blessing of God that our first work is to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth! And according to the agonizing birth stories my mom shared this past week... that is work! As God's image bearers, we take up the task of filling the earth. God started by creating Adam and Eve, and we continue fulfilling this command by being blessed with kids and filling the earth with the family of God. Larry and I don't have children yet, but we still take this blessing of a command seriously to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth! We as a community live out this command not only when we raise our own children but when you teach Sunday School and foster children and invite offenders at Purdy Prison to be extended

family. You bear fruit in relationship, you multiply God's family, and you fill the earth with people who know God through you.

(But God's commands for us don't stop there. Remember, we are made in God's image! We are not merely created animals blessed just as all the rest of creation. Our end is not mere procreation. And we are not equivalent to the animals. As God's image bearers, he has particular, higher level work for us.)

The second half of Genesis 1:28 gives us the work of stewarding creation. Look down and see the commands to subdue and rule over or have dominion. They are kingly words. They're used elsewhere in Scripture to talk about taking over a country—subduing its people and having dominion over the land. Now, we're not the king, right? God is the King, he is the ruler. The fact is, God could have reigned directly over creation, but he chose to impress his image upon men that we might subdue and have dominion over this brand-new creation of his. God restrained himself from getting creation all organized all on his own and instead commissioned us to rule over it with him.

I'm not talking about kingly work where you stay on the throne in a purple velvet robe and direct. This is about the hands dirty, often overlooked, God in the garden, messy work of subduing. God asks us to keep on with the work he was already doing. Isn't that amazing? God has commissioned us to do what he does... cultivate things so that they're fruitful, so that they multiply, so that they fill the earth, subdue the earth, organize it, have dominion over it!

Together this is the work of stewardship. He chose to make us in his image that we would be able to participate in this work of ongoing stewardship. We don't use this word "steward" on a daily basis, but I want to make the case it's the best word. I hate to use the word stewardship in a sermon, because we've attached it in the church only as it regards how we give money to the church. But money is just a portion of what we are called to steward. I'm going to stick to the word steward and, I hope, redeem this word for you. A steward is unique in that he has the authority of the ruler without the ownership. A steward is here in the physical time and space doing the work of the true owner. And so, the steward cares for all that he has been given with the same care as the owner himself. He's not going to even consider exploiting the owner's property. He's the steward! He's going to cultivate the land or the financial portfolio just as if he owned the place!

My dad is the kind of steward that you want for your property. Even with rentals, he treats them like his own. At this past week's vacation rental house, he reconditioned the grill, bought and replaced at least a dozen light bulbs, and raked the beach of the seaweed. (And that's just what I "caught" him doing!) This is what it means to be a steward, a representative of God. We look at his creation and we ask, "How would Jesus do this work?" And then we do it like he would. We are his image bearers.

Subduing and having dominion is the work of taking what is as yet undeveloped or in need of repair and making it the best it could possibly be. Tim Keller points out that in this very word subdue God is commissioning man to take what is still undeveloped and “unlock” its “deep untapped potential for cultivation” through their work. God could have finished the work himself, certainly! He had no problem making those animals fruitful, multiplying, and filling them all on his own. But God desires our participation in his work! (Isn't that amazing?) And his work is the kingly work of stewarding the earth by subduing it and having dominion over it!

What has God given you that you could organize better, that you could put in its place, or that needs help being cultivated? Dave Ramsey of Financial Peace University loves the slogan, “You’ve got to tell your money where to go.” You create and organize a budget and spend it with discernment to be profitable. I know another one of you has a business organizing closets. (If you need her name, come and talk to me afterward.) Teachers rework concepts so that they find fertile ground in the minds of their residents. My dad, the pilot, maximizes efficiency on a daily basis. God has given you something. How are you stewarding it?

Stewardship really involves everything in your life God has given you. You are to steward the time God gives you just as much as your stuff. I’ll be the first to say I struggle with this, but you know what? Subduing your time is a lot like stewarding your money; you have to tell it where to go! And you need margin to do that... so you can’t say yes to everything! And I know, I have talked with some of you who are parents who really struggle with feeling like your kids need to be in at least one social, one athletic and one musical activity. It’s your role as parents to steward your children’s time. They can’t do it. And if you don’t subdue their schedules for them, then you are training them up and cultivating within them a workaholicism and a performance mentality that will only grow and, dare I say, become really unhealthy when they’re adults. You are setting the pattern by the way you steward your own life. How would Jesus do this work? How would He steward the time given to your families? May I just pastorally encourage you as I preach to myself, take dominion over the time God gives you. Don’t let it become overgrown with commitments all over the place. What you cultivate in the lives of your families now will reap an eternal harvest.

I want to skip down to Genesis 2 where we have the opportunity to zoom in on 2 other words for work that partner with what it means to steward the creation.

Genesis 2:15 *“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”*

This tells us that our work is to work and to take care of what God gives us. A quick word search reveals that the pairing of these two words comes together in one other place: the tabernacle. The priests had the work of working and taking

care of the tabernacle. This is language of service and guardianship. We are called not only to work by stewarding as kings—subduing and ruling—but also to serve as priests... to work and to take care of. This is what we are called to be in relationship to all that God gives us: Kings and priests who do something. Isn't that amazing? Do you think of yourself as a king or priest? Like Rachel Toone, the "Queen of the Afternoon Drink" at the "Altar of the Bar Cart."

It might sound ridiculous at first to put these religious words with your daily life, but I believe this is who God is calling us to be in relationship to what he gives us—kings and priests. Remember... what did God say when he was done creating? Yes! It was very good! God values deeply this physical world. In fact, take some time to read Revelation 21 and 22 this week and see that eternity is lived out not in an ethereal heaven but in a perfect, physical world. He wants us to serve in the context of this physical world! To work and to take care of what God has physically created... what he has given you.

The work of the priest—the work of serving—is not easy business. My first job out of college was as at a bed and breakfast. My family had this dream of owning a B&B together on a lake when my dad retires. We reminisced this week about all the roles we had sketched out for one another. Seriously, this was a real plan that we thought we would be enacting, like 5 years from now. But then I realized the amount of service this job required. My first day as an "innkeeper" (such a dignified title, don't you think... the "Queen of Innkeeping"?)—actually, I think it was even in my first hour—I was tasked with cleaning the hall bathroom. In one 9-hour shift my rhythm was to water the garden, make and serve breakfast, help clean the rooms, plan a wedding, give historical tours, coordinate business meetings, unclog a toilet, and play concierge. The woman who was discipling me at the time told me that I wasn't allowed to quit until I learned to make a bed to the glory of God. Well, I did not learn that at that job. The job was pure service, and I thought I was above it. I did not see that if I saw that job as Jesus saw it, he would have plunged that toilet so well it probably would never have clogged again. But Jesus wouldn't do it for the personal recognition that I was looking for, but because the Inn thrived by having unclogged toilets! Jesus is glorified in the excellence of that work, and because it is an act of love for the people staying there.

I'm getting ahead of myself to next week's "why do we work?" but the point is... I hadn't learned that God's intention from the beginning for good work for us is the work of service. Being a good worker and caretaker of creation means serving the world and serving the people of the world. Genesis 2:15 says that service has always been our "something" to do with what God gives us.

So, how can you better serve the people in your life? God has called you to serve and to take care of his creation as your work. Whether the need is hunger or health or cleanliness or organization or prayer... what human need could you meet by the way you work?

(These might be easier questions to answer if we were in the Garden of Eden. This work of stewardship and service is all beautiful in the idyllic, perfect Garden. But what do all these religious words mean for our work? What is work for us in a broken world?)

Pastor Mark reminded us that these Genesis commands are all pre-Fall commands to work. Before sin entered the world, what was work? Work was to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. Work was to steward and to serve. And what happened when we sinned? Frustration flooded the work scene. Our work was cursed. Thorns and thistles, envy and greed, lack of clarity and failure became our work realities.

So God came to break the curse. And he did. He broke it. God came in the person of Jesus and did the work of the perfect man. He was the perfect king and priest. We saw what it meant to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth as he taught his disciples who taught disciples and filled the earth with the people of God to such a fruitful degree that I stand here as a believer in Jesus as a result of their multiplication. Jesus showed us what perfect stewardship looked like as he subdued the demons and reorganized society to include outcasts. We saw him serve... washing feet and feeding the hungry. Jesus is our perfect priest... our perfect king.

The ultimate work of the Son of God was alluded to in Genesis 3:15. Even when the curse was pronounced, the work of defeating the enemy of death and the devil was also announced. The fulfillment of this work came on the cross when Jesus cried out dying for us, for our sin, "It is finished!" We know that the curse of our sin is broken because Jesus rose from the dead three days later declaring his victory. By rising from the dead, he broke the curse of death forever! Death was the major curse given when sin entered the world. But the curse that our work would be toilsome was broken as well. And just as we long for the day when death will be no more and we will all be raised just as Christ was raised—so too do we long for the day when work no longer requires sweating and thorns. We long for the day when our disabilities are healed so that we can do the work we want to do again. We long for the day when there is work for us to do. Work is part of eternity, and in eternity our work will no longer be cursed.

Yet the command is still to work. We're going to sweat and toil over it, but it's our very design. One of the ways that we "image" God is to work—to steward as kings, to serve as priests—just like Jesus did the work.

Now you can keep working without Jesus. We would still be working if Jesus had not come and died and been raised again. And what would that have looked like? You know what it looks like. You see it every day. Some of you are working without Jesus. We all work with people who don't believe this—that Jesus has broken the curse of sin and death and toilsome labor. And what do we have when

say, “No thanks, Jesus”? We still have sweaty, toilsome work. But it becomes all vanity, as the author of Ecclesiastes says. Without Jesus, we miss out on his promise, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” Without Jesus, you don’t know the nearness of God in your work. And without Jesus being raised from the dead, your work is meaningless. You’ll hand your work over to someone else when you retire or when you die and you hope that they’re wise and that they steward it well. Struggling without Jesus, there is no eternity for your work. God has set eternity in our hearts.

But praise be to God. He has promised that he will never leave us. He has promised us that while your work is hard and frustrating, He is here for the weary and heavy laden and He will give you rest for your souls. He has set eternity in our hearts. The Good News of God is Good News for your work. You have work to do. Do something with what God gives you. Make it profitable. Multiply it. Fill the earth with people in your life who know God because of you. What has God given you? Time... projects... subdue them. Make those flights efficient. Who has he put in your life? Serve them. Care for them.

Jesus rose from the dead, and we will, too. And the world we will live in forever with him will include work. So start practicing! Jesus is with you in your work. And he cares about it! Do something with what God gives you so that the world thrives and Jesus is glorified.

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. How has work been defined for you in the past?

2. Where else does Jesus address work? (Tip: Do a word search for “work” at biblegateway.com to see other passages that use the word.) Is our working draft of a definition consistent with other places Jesus talks about work?

3. What/Who has God given you that you know you are to steward or serve?