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Pastor Mark Toone  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *Blue Collar God: Bottom Line* Genesis 2:5-17

Well, last weekend was an exciting time in the Toone household. We made a pilgrimage to Spokane to watch our daughter Rachel graduate from Whitworth University. As a trustee and father of a grad, I was invited to sit on the stage for the commencement ceremony. I accepted this honor without really thinking it through. I had to behave myself for two hours and forty minutes... with thousands of eyes upon me! I couldn't do a crossword puzzle. I couldn't play Angry Birds. I couldn't squirm or make snide remarks. I had to be an adult for two hours and forty minutes as 603 students walked across the stage to receive their diploma. Do you have any idea what a challenge that was for me!

But it was worth it. As Rachel walked across the stage, I got the chance to jump up and grab this Kodak moment. *[Photo of Rachel]*

The ceremony was long, but the excitement was contagious as these students completed this important chapter of their lives! But there was something else in the air... a question not far from anyone's mind. What now! Four years in college; checks written with too many zeroes; piles of debt incurred... all to receive credentials that will prepare them for what? More education? Maybe. Rachel's off to Gordon-Conwell Seminary next fall. But then what? After the last degree is completed, what's next? Work, right? We hope! A life of work lies ahead.

Our sermon series on work has really resonated with this congregation. I don't know why I'm surprised. Too often the church has ignored this huge piece of our lives... of our Christian discipleship. In our hearts, we disciples of Jesus want to live lives of integration, want to tear down that sacred/secular divide between, want to know that God actually cares as much about what we do Monday through Friday as he does about what we do on a Sunday morning or Wednesday night.

In the first sermon, we discovered a blue collar God who delighted in the work of creation and got his hands dirty planting a garden and shaping a human out of soil. Then we discovered that since we are created in God's image, we also are created to work, not as a punishment or even as a necessity, but as part of the blessing of creation. Work is a blessing! And last week Pastor Megan rolled out a definition of work by offering this as a starting point: "Work is doing something with what God gives you..."

Obviously the Christian foundation for work—and frankly, all of life—is the assumption that all we have has been given to us by God. In Genesis, Adam and Eve aren't creating something out of nothing. They take the "stuff" that God has given them—the raw materials of life—and do something with it. They don't create plants but they tend and care for the ones that God creates and gives them. They don't create animals, but Adam names the animals that God creates. The starting point for a Christian theology of work is that God creates, and then He invites us to play in His sandbox... invites us to continue his creative work, to organize and arrange and subdue and prune and tend and name and harvest.

When we say that work is "doing something with what God gives you," we understand that in very broad terms. To some, God has given toilets to be plunged and beds to be made. To some God has given airplanes to fly. To some God has given young minds to be shaped. The starting point for a healthy definition of work is to realize that all of us have been given gifts, passions and abilities, and arenas in which we can exercise those gifts, passions and abilities. To the degree that our passions and work are aligned, we experience a sense of God's purpose and pleasure. As the Olympian Eric Liddell said in the movie *Chariots of Fire*, "God made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure!"

The revolutionary message of the Bible is this: when you work—when you do something with what God has given you—that is a holy undertaking. It can be an act of worship, every bit as "spiritual" as me preaching a sermon on Sunday morning. How I long for you to understand this, beloved! You teachers, pilots, secretaries, plumbers, housewives, custodians, businessmen, computer geniuses, students, accountants, soldiers, doctors, retirees, nurses, truck drivers, salesmen... what am I missing? If I have not landed on your career, call it out! Yes, all of you! I want you to understand that what you are doing in your work is a holy calling!

But to what end? If work is doing something with what God has given us... why? What is the purpose? If I were to ask you to complete the definition, how would you do it? Work is doing something with what God has given us so that... what? I can make a living? I can take care of my family? I can make a name for myself? I can succeed. I can retire comfortably? Aren't these the common answers in our culture? Why do we work? Because we have student loans to pay off and we want to sleep under a roof and we'd like to eat more than Top Ramen for dinner. We'd like to buy a car and take a vacation once in a while. We'd like to make memories with family and friends. We'd like to someday stop working so hard and travel and see the world.

So is there anything wrong with those answers? No! But here's the important question: is that enough? Is there anything missing? Yes, I think there is. And it's the part that makes all the difference in the world...literally. And that brings us to the next phrase in our definition: Work is doing something with what God has given us so that the world thrives and Jesus is glorified. How many of you ever

heard your parents say, "The world doesn't owe you a thing!" But do you agree with the blogger whose web says, "I don't owe the world anything, either!" That's not what the Bible teaches. As you listen to our reading, ask yourself, "What is the picture of the world that this passage paints? What kind of world is being described?" *[Read 2: 4-15]*

So as you listen to this description of God's creation, what picture comes to mind? What kind of world has God created? Is it a world of scarcity... a world that provides only enough to get by? No! The world of God's creation is a world of plenty... a world that flourishes. A world that teems! When he plants the garden called Eden, he doesn't drop in a few trees to provide enough food for his new human beings to survive. No, verse 9 says that God "made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food."

Do you hear the lavishness of God's work? The excess? He doesn't just make some trees...he makes all kinds of trees. He doesn't just make trees that are nourishing... he makes trees that are good for food. He doesn't just make trees that are good for food... he makes trees that are pleasing to the eye! He doesn't plant a garden in which human beings can survive... he gives them a garden in which they can thrive! Can you see this in your mind's eye? A garden so green, so lush, so beautiful, so fragrant, so delicious that it floods the senses and the soul with God's goodness.

And it's not just the garden that thrives in God's new world. We hear of four great rivers, not one or two. We hear a description of a place where gold can be found—and not just any gold—good gold. But who cares about gold if there is no monetary system and no one to buy things from? What good is it? Well, it is beautiful... and so is the onyx, and so is the fragrant resin. God creates a world that is more than adequate... more than just enough. He creates a world that is extravagantly beautiful, extravagantly generous, extravagantly good and it is into this world the man is placed... to work and subdue and tend and care for. In other words, God offers Adam the gift of an extravagant world and says, "This is what is possible! This is what I intend. Now, I hand it to you to steward. I want you to work so that my world continues to thrive."

And God the Son picked up where God the Father left off, didn't he? Everything Jesus touched thrived. Think of his first miracle at the wedding in Cana when they ran out of wine—a scandalous breach of social etiquette. Jesus didn't just produce enough wine to get by—although that would have been impressive enough—he turned 180 gallons of water into 180 gallons of wine, and we aren't talking Thunderbird here. We are talking 1869 Chateau Lafite worth \$233,000 a bottle, the finest wine the steward of the house had ever tasted. That party thrived! When Jesus miraculously fed a crowd of 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish, there were twelve baskets of leftovers! That multitude thrived! Jesus cast out demons and restored sight and healed leprosy and raised widows' dead sons to life. Everywhere Jesus went the world thrived because of his work.

“Work is doing something with what God gives you so that the world thrives and Jesus is glorified.” That is a biblical definition of work. But you might say, “Wait a minute: there’s nothing in that definition that talks about caring for my family! I have to put beans on the table and a roof over their heads. Isn’t that an important part of work?” Of course it is. That is part of your world that needs to thrive. It is clear from Genesis that Adam is given the task of working and tending the garden in part so that he and his wife can benefit from it. It is my work to help my particular corner of the world thrive. I am to provide for my family, house them, feed them, clothe them, educate them, entertain and enrich them. I want that part of my world to thrive, and it is clearly God’s intent that I assume dominion over that part of the world in a way that no one else can or should.

But as I have thought and prayed about my work, I have realized this is not my problem. I understand my call to work so that my corner of the world will thrive, but I’ve come to realize this about myself: I can be self-centered—selfish, even. My definition of “world” is very small. I like to cloister myself. I like to hunker down in my corner of the world, and frankly, hide. We have an acre of land. You have to drive over a bridge across our creek to get to us. It feels like a drawbridge over a moat protecting my little castle and I like that! Maybe it’s because of the nature of my work—maybe it’s living in a fishbowl—but when I go home, I often feel like I want to hide from the world. I will take care of “my” little kingdom, I will work hard so that my portion of the world flourishes. But really, my world’s boundary lines end at my property lines. Can you relate to that?

I am not proud of this, but it is the realization I’ve come to these last couple months as I’ve been thinking about my work in light of this sermon series. My “world” is pretty small. The part of my world that I really care most about, really want to thrive, is pretty tiny, really—my family, my church—and I have been convicted that I cannot expect my congregation to reach out, to live in community, to care about this world’s thriving if I hide behind my own drawbridge. And so, as I thought about this, I confessed my self-centeredness to the Lord and began to look for ways I could work so that the world—a world bigger than my self-interests—could thrive.

I found several. I’ll share one. I’m helping a family remodel a home where they will get a new start on life... demolishing walls and laying subflooring and laminate and moving cabinets. I’ve been doing this on some days after my work at church. I’m not just organizing others to do these things, which I can do well, I’m doing this myself because I realized my soul needed it. I needed to draw the boundaries of my world more widely than my own self-interests, because I discovered in writing sermons for you all that I, too, have been created by God to help His world thrive by my work... a world that extends beyond my property lines and bank accounts.

This has been an epiphany for me, honestly. Something many of you—especially those who have turned your retirement into second careers of service—have already discovered. Cyndi and I will be empty-nesters in a few weeks and as we are trying to imagine what this season of our lives will look like, God has been kind enough to show us the sense of purpose and fulfillment that comes from caring about a world that is bigger than our little garden. This work we've been doing, this different kind of work for me—hard, muscle-aching, back-bending, ibuprofen-popping work—is about more than enriching myself or paying off our house faster or strengthening my retirement position. It is about helping the world to thrive, and as I have done this, I have thrived!

So I wonder, isn't this one of the key issues facing most of us here this morning? It's not that we don't want to work hard so that our world can thrive. It's that our definition of world can be so narrow and self-serving. We work hard to provide a beautiful home so that our families can thrive but don't really think about that family that needs a home. We work hard to haul our children from sporting event to music practice so that they will thrive but don't really think about children that have no such opportunities. We work hard so that our retirement will thrive but don't really think about using those years to help others thrive.

Our worlds are too small... most of us. It is why so many here are not generous in supporting our church or with anyone else, for that matter. It is why so many of us do not feel fulfilled in what we do. It is why so many of us are disappointed with life even though, by the world's standards, we have material wealth and opportunity that beggar the imagination! Our world is too small, for most of us, and we are missing out on the blessing of work that helps a larger world to thrive.

I wonder... how would it change your work if you asked yourself this question: "Am I helping the world thrive by what I do and the way I do it?" Is the world thriving because of the joyful way you prepare that latte? Is the world thriving because the toilet you plunged is flowing again? Is the world thriving because you spend your retirement building houses for the poor? Is the world thriving by the way you raise your children? Is the world thriving because your company creates jobs and wealth for other families? Is the world thriving because you care deeply about the health of every patient who walks into your clinic? How would it change your approach to work, if at the end of every day you could declare, "Because of how I worked today, the world thrives a bit more!"

This Memorial Sunday seems a particularly appropriate day to ask this question. No nation on earth has worked harder—no nation has contributed more of its own lifeblood than the United States of America—that the rest of the world might thrive. There are plenty of things wrong with us—plenty of things for which to repent and which need changing—but it can still be fairly said that the work of the United States has helped the larger world to thrive.

I want that to be said of us, too, don't you? I want it to be said that because of how the saints of Chapel Hill work—work in their vocation, work in their home, work in their retirement, doing something with what God has given us—because of that, our world thrives and Jesus is glorified. Is that so for you? If you left with one question this morning, perhaps it would be the one I have been asking myself these last weeks: "Is my world too small? Do I care if the world thrives beyond the limits of my property line, my bank account, my family, my retirement? Is that the purpose of my work?" Go ahead, think about it. Pray about it. I hope it makes you as uncomfortable as it made me, and I hope it makes you repent and do something about it, too.

## **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. Can you repeat the definition of work?
  2. What does it mean to you that our work is intended to "make the world thrive"? How have you experienced that?
  3. How is this definition different from the world's definition of work? In what way is Jesus glorified in your work?