

## **“The Sacred Nature of Work”**

**Genesis 2:4-17**

**May 8, 2022**

---

### **INTRODUCTION:**

There are times when things are separated that belong together, with harmful results. For example, if Valentine’s Day is separated from romantic gifts, the results are not pleasing, something I found out the hard way early in my marriage when I gave Wendy an umbrella for Valentine’s Day. Today’s text keeps together two things commonly separated in our day, the sacred and the secular. Even in the church, many look upon the sacred activities of Sunday as completely different from the secular activities of Monday through Saturday. As we continue looking at a theology of work, we see in Genesis 2 that a prominent feature of life in God’s paradise is to keep together the sacred and the secular. God intends all of life to be sacred worship. The hymn expresses well this thought. “When morning gilds the skies, my heart awaking cries, May Jesus Christ be praised. Alike in work and prayer to Jesus I repair: May Jesus Christ be praised.” We worship and praise Jesus alike in work and prayer.

The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther was famous for his emphasis on the sacred nature of our daily work. In 1520, he published a short work called *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. The following paragraph is typical of his emphasis.

The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone....Indeed, the menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God than all the fastings and other works of a monk or priest, because the monk or priest lacks faith.

Two priests in Holland read Luther’s pamphlet and acted upon it in a way that shocked their parish. They announced that the doors of the church building would be open only on Sunday and closed the rest of the week, a practice that marked a significant change from previous practice in having the doors open all week. Their reasoning was simply to help their parishioners see that the work they did on six days of the week was no less sacred than the work they as clergy were doing. The parishioners didn’t need to come to the church building to do their “spiritual” service. Rather, God’s desire was that their daily work become part of their spiritual worship. These ideas are found in the first two chapters of the Bible. Let’s explore this further by considering the two commands of Genesis 2:15.

## I. Work the Garden

**“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it”** (2:15). Mankind was tasked with working the garden and keeping the garden. Let’s look first at this word “work,” and I want to propose a definition of work from this chapter. Work is a creation ordinance in which we partner with God for the development of the earth’s potential as a garden-city where mankind and God can live together. There are three components to that definition, and let’s begin with this idea of work as a creation ordinance. Before paradise was lost due to mankind’s rebellion against his Creator, work was an essential part of life, which is what is meant by a creation ordinance. Work is of the essence of who we are as human beings. It is a natural law, like gravity. You can defy the law of gravity, but the results will not be pleasant. Similarly, the law of labor can also be denied, but also with unpleasant results. Luther expresses this with characteristic flare. “God does not want to have success come without work.... He does not want me to sit at home, to loaf, to commit matters to God, and to wait till a fried chicken flies into my mouth. That would be tempting God.”

The biblical view of work values both physical and mental work. We see Adam and Eve tasked with working the garden, which would have required physical exertion. We also see in the next section of Genesis 2 the work of naming the animals, clearly work of a more intellectual nature. The Bible’s view of work differs from the classical Greek view, which looks down upon manual labor and elevates the work of the mind. This is a point at which the Bible challenges the values of our culture. We tend to value white collar jobs over blue collar, and we tend to value the high-paying job over the lower-paying job. As we saw earlier in Luther’s words, the Bible values faith and challenges us to be men and women of faith in our work. A faithful janitor is just as significant and important as a pastor, missionary, doctor or successful entrepreneur. Phillip Jensen made a very important point when he wrote, “If God came into the world, what would he be like? For the ancient Greeks, he might have been a philosopher-king. The ancient Romans might have looked for a just and noble statesman. But how does the God of the Hebrews come into the world? As a carpenter.”

The mystery writer Dorothy Sayers was passionate about this whole area of a biblical view of work. In an essay titled “Why Work,” she wrote, “The Church’s approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to [moral instruction and church attendance]. What the Church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables.”

The first truth we see in this chapter, then, is that work is a creation ordinance, essential to our nature as created image-bearers of God. The second truth we see about the duty to work the garden is that we are in partnership

with God in our work. We don't work alone, but shoulder to shoulder with God. Notice verse 5. **"When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground."** God sends the rain and man joins in the partnership with God by working the ground. Together, they accomplish the fruitfulness of the garden.

We see this divine-human partnership elsewhere in the Bible when it comes to our work. Jesus taught us to pray for our material needs in the Lord's Prayer with the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread." But the Bible also says that our daily bread comes as a product of our work. Paul wrote against the sin of idleness in his second letter to the Thessalonians. **"For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living"** (3:11-12). It is in this same context that we read his oft-quoted rule, **"If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat"** (v. 10). How are our needs to be met? According to these verses, we pray and we work. God has a role to play in answering our prayer, and we have a role to play in our work. There is partnership.

In his work, *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis contrasts a side-by-side relationship to a face-to-face relationship. The side-by-side relationship is centered on a common interest that two friends share. This is the common mark of friendship love. When two men develop a friendship, their first move is almost never to say, "Let's talk about us. Can we be friends?" Rather, it happens when they share a common interest and work side-by-side in that interest. Perhaps it's a love of golf, of bike-riding or of book-reading. It can be almost anything. It is the same in our relationship with God. Intimacy with God has a face-to-face component, which is what we normally experience in prayer and in corporate worship. But it also has a side-by-side component, which we commonly experience in our work.

This brings up the important question of how we should think about our common interest with God. What exactly are we working on in our partnership with God? In order to answer that question, we need to take a step back and see the broad sweep of the Bible's story from Genesis to Revelation. There is amazing unity in the Bible's story, a story that begins with a garden and ends with a garden-city. The first paradise is a garden, while the final paradise is described in terms of both a garden and a city. The last two chapters of Revelation describe the final home of God's people in terms of a city, calling it the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2). But then it is also described in terms appropriate for a garden and reminiscent of Genesis 2. For example, it has a river flowing through it and the tree of life with its fruit.

What does this unity of the Bible's story have to do with our work? It teaches us that our work should be viewed as that of developing the potential

that is built into creation. Just as an acorn has the potential to become a giant oak tree, so the original creation has the potential to become this garden-city where mankind lives with God. It is a city of beauty, health and joy. Every legitimate job in some way works to develop the potential inherent in creation to become this kind of paradise. When we bring faith to work, we are partnering with God toward this end. Here's the way Tim Keller says it. God's "world is not hostile, so that it needs to be beaten down like an enemy. Rather, its potential is undeveloped, so it needs to be cultivated like a garden. So we are not to relate to the world as park rangers, whose job is not to change their space, but to preserve things as they are. Nor are we to 'pave over the garden' of the created world to make a parking lot."

I want to repeat here the same application as the one I made last week. It is important that you make the effort to see how your particular job fits in with this big picture of developing the potential in creation to become this garden-city where humanity lives with God. I mentioned last week the surprising fact that indoor plumbing has saved more lives than almost any other human development. So plumbers are not just connecting pipes so that they don't leak, but are saving lives through keeping clean water and dirty water separate. Here's another illustration, also from the book by Steven Johnson. If you were to look at a pharmaceutical catalogue from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, about half of the medicines found there would be poisonous. People died, including many children, from taking medicines that were marketed for their healing properties. That led, in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the formation of the FDA. Johnson reports how another big saver of lives is often-maligned government regulation. I don't mention that to make a point that we need more government regulation, because in that area, like in every other human endeavor in this fallen world, there are problems and shortcomings. Rather, my point is simply the need for us all to connect our jobs, no matter how mundane and boring they may seem to be at times, with this bigger picture of the development of creation's potential.

## **II. Keep the Garden**

So we've considered this first word of "work," and we've seen that work is a creation ordinance in which we partner with God for the development of the earth's potential as a garden-city where mankind and God can live together. Let's consider now this second word, "keep." It means to guard and protect, with a clear understanding of threat. The garden needs mankind to develop its potential, but also to protect it and conserve it from damage. Christians are called to creation care. We shouldn't be diverted from this by the fact that some environmentalists worship the earth in an idolatrous manner. If we really mean it when we sing, "This is my Father's world," then we will be concerned to protect and guard creation.

The next two verses make it clear that something beyond creation care is in view with this word. **“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’”** (2:16-17). There is a danger in our work life that can derail everything, and that danger is represented by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was the forbidden tree. We learn two things about this tree in Genesis 2. First, Adam and Eve are not given the reason for its forbidden nature. That is a significant statement about our place and God’s place in the world. Derek Kidner says that this tree presents the alternative to true discipleship, and that alternative is “to be self-made, wresting one’s knowledge, satisfactions and values from the created world in defiance of the Creator.” To apply that to our work life, our danger is to find our meaning in our work rather than in obedience to God. Our work is very important, but it’s not ultimate. If we sever our work from God, we end up ruining our work. Just as death was the penalty for Adam and Eve eating of this forbidden fruit, so a type of death comes to our work if it is severed from God. Our work is not for the purpose of making a great name for ourselves, but to partner with God to the end that his glory would be spread through the earth. And God wants that to happen not because he is selfish, but because he is God and our life and joy is to be found only in glorifying him as God. In other words, God wants us to seek his glory not out of a need in him, but out of a need within us.

The second thing we learn about this tree of the knowledge of good and evil is that it is in the midst of the garden (2:9). That means that it was not off in a corner somewhere but right in the middle, so that it would be passed multiple times in the normal course of their daily activities. As Adam and Eve went about their daily work, they would be reminded of their need to keep their work under God’s authority. This was intended by God to be a gift to Adam and Eve, giving them fresh joy every time they passed the tree and being reminded of God’s authority and the goodness of his commands. It’s an opportunity we too have multiple times every day. Our closing hymn today gives us words to bring to God in our daily work throughout the day. “I ask thee for the daily strength, to none that ask denied, a mind to blend with outward life, while keeping at thy side, content to fill a little space, if thou be glorified.”

## **CONCLUSION:**

Like Adam and Eve, we fail to honor God’s limits. A type of death results. Thankfully, there is another tree right beside the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the tree of life. Ultimately, that tree of life is the cross of Christ, which restores paradise to sinners who have chosen the path of self and sin. May our work be used of God to restore that paradise by pointing people to our Savior!